David Irving

ACCIDENT

The Death of General Sikorski

[*Publisher's note*: This is the original 1967 text. In about 1990 a revised edition was prepared but never published. We shall post that soon. Many official files on the crash have since been opened.]

Sikorski's crashed Liberator

Never before published, this photograph taken on the morning after the crash from a low-flying aircraft shows the main wingspan and its four engines lying intact on the seabed in thirty feet of water, with the tail assembly broken off and to its right. The landing wheels are not fully retracted and large patches of petrol are floating away on the sea's surface.

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR:
The Destruction of Dresden
The Mare's Nest
The Virus House

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List of Persons

Some of the People in the Narrative

BOLLAND, Group-Captain Guy: R.A.F. Gibraltar North Front, Station Commander

CAZALET, Colonel Victor: British Liaison Officer with Sikorski

CHURCHILL, Winston: Prime Minister (1940–5)

DUDZINSKI, Major S.: Inspector General, Polish Air Force

EDEN, Anthony: Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1941–5)

ELTON, Group Captain John G.: President of Court of Inquiry

GRIGG, Sir James: Secretary of State for War

KLIMECKI, General Tadeusz: Polish Chief of the General Staff

KUKIEL, General Marian: then Polish Minister of Defence

LESNIOWSKA, Madame Zofia: Sikorski's only child

"LOCK, Mr W. H." and "Mr PINDER": two English passengers, independent of the Polish party, whose occupations cannot with certainty be established. "Mr Pinder" was said to be, in one of the Polish documents, Head of the Intelligence Service in the Middle East

LUBIENSKI, Lieutenant Ludwik: Polish forces liaison officer in Gibraltar

MAISKY, Ivan: Soviet Ambassador in London (1932–43)

MARECKI, Colonel Andrzej: Polish Chief of Operations Staff

MASON-MACFARLANE, Lt. General Sir Frank Noël: Governor of Gibraltar (1942–4)

MIKOLACZYK, Stanislaw: Sikorski's successor as Prime Minister

PERRY, Flight Lieutenant A. J.: A.D.C. to Governor of Gibraltar

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PRCHAL, Flight Lieutenant Edward Maks: pilot of Liberator AL523

QUAYLE, Major Anthony: military assistant to the Governor of Gibraltar

ROOSEVELT, Franklin: President of U.S.A. (1933–45)

SIKORSKI, General Wladyslaw: Prime Minister of Poland and Polish Commander-in-Chief

SIMPSON, Air Commodore S. P.: Air Officer Commanding Gibraltar

STALIN, Joseph: Soviet General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party

ULLMAN, Tadeusz: observer sent by Poles to Court of Inquiry

WHITELEY, Brigadier J. P.: British M.P. and passenger on Liberator AL523

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1: "Soldiers Must Die"

Eight-thirty A.M. in Gibraltar.

The silent crowds of early workers line both pavements of the narrow streets leading from the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Saint Mary the Crowned to the entrance to the naval dockyard. Spaniards and Britons alike shuffle in the rising heat and crane their necks to see past the troops lining the streets. The sun is rising above the Mediterranean, and high up in the tunnels of the Rock the British sentries stamp to and fro. In the distance the crowds hear the muffled tramp of marching feet, and the clatter of hard wheels on ancient cobble stones.

In a simple pine coffin packed round with all the ice that the British messes can supply, its sides cracking and blistering in the heat of the sun's rays filtering through the Polish colours, lies the body of Poland's greatest son, General Wladyslaw Sikorski, roughly wrapped in a Royal Navy blanket. A six-wheeled tractor pulls the gun-carriage on which the coffin rests. Up in the Fortress, a gun booms out in a seventeen-gun salute, punctuating every minute of the procession's journey to the docks.

The British Government has promised that the Polish premier's body shall be brought to Poland when once the war is won; but this is not to be fulfilled. A company of Somerset Light Infantry march behind the coffin, and at their head the Allied officers who only five days before had welcomed the General to the Rock. Immediately behind the gun-carriage walks the Catholic bishop in white mitre and full funeral robes. In the cortège are a hundred Polish soldiers

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in British battledress, their grim faces visible to all the watching crowds. The deep bell of the Catholic cathedral is tolling, and the warship's crew in the dockyard know that the procession is on its way.[1]

A mile away in the military hospital lies the pilot who alone survived his aircraft's crash. The newspapers say that he has suffered terrible injuries and that nobody can speak to him. Now the procession is leaving Convent Square and passing through streets of closed shops and shuttered windows, against a setting of Moorish scrolls and whitewashed walls. The gun-carriage passes through Southport Gates and is drawn up alongside the Polish destroyer that has come to carry Sikorski's body away. Stalwart sailors push the flag-draped coffin of their dead Commander-in-Chief up onto their shoulders and carry it up the gangway onto the deck. A boatswain's pipe wails and a British military band strikes up the Polish national anthem on the quay. Four Polish sailors mount guard on the coffin and *Orkan* heads out to sea.

"Soldiers must die, but by their death they nourish the nation which gave them birth." That is what Mr Churchill says to Poland in its hour of grief.[2]

Well, Sikorski is dead; and where stands his nation now?

(i)

General Sikorski was sixty-two years old at the time of his death. He had been Chief of the Polish General Staff earlier on in his career, and he became Prime Minister of Poland in 1922 at a time when the country had faced many external difficulties. By his domestic and foreign policy he had changed the country's whole position in the four years before he retired into private life. After Poland's defeat and her division between Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939, Sikorski escaped to Paris, and there he was approached to form a new Polish Government in exile.[3]

Of all the leaders of governments-in-exile of that period, Sikorski was the most successful and the most realistic. Had it not been Poland's tragedy that Marshal Stalin had long determined upon a course

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of imperialistic expansion to the West, perhaps none of the narrative that follows would have had to be written. The Russian plans had taken no account of Sikorski's personality. He preserved the continuity of his country's government even in exile, and he established that he was respected and recognised by far the greatest part of the population left in occupied Poland. With pride, he often commented that in all of Poland the Germans could not find a man of substance willing to act as Vidkun Quisling had acted in Norway. His country's soldiers had fought as gallantly as any in Norway and France, and Polish airmen had battled magnificently in the skies over London, and were still fighting in the R.A.F.'s gruelling battle for command of the air over Germany. The vast army of Polish exiles that he had built up was a valuable contribution to the war effort, and one with which none of the Allies would willingly dispense.

When the German armies fell upon the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, General Sikorski was among the first to realise the importance of forgetting past enmities, and he was the architect of the "honourable" agreement reached by the Polish Government with the Soviet Union in July of that year. An important clause of this agreement was one in which the Russians expressly confirmed that the Russo-German Pact of August 1939 was null and void. Even more important, the Russians guaranteed, as Sikorski's government interpreted it, to release the million or more deported Poles, and the formation of a Polish army on Soviet soil.

In December 1941, General Sikorski personally went to Moscow for conversations with Marshal Stalin, and before he left the Russian leader declared that he was in favour of the establishment of a strong and free Poland after the war, a pledge he was to continue to make until the death of Sikorski in 1943. To Sikorski it nonetheless became clear during the first months of 1942 that the Soviet Union still had post-war designs on Polish territories, involving concessions to which he had no mandate from his nation to accede.

The Russian diplomatic offensive began at the height of the Red Army's first triumph, the defeat of the Germans outside Moscow. Allied fortunes were correspondingly approaching their lowest point,

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and it was no time to begin bargaining over future frontiers. On January 6, 1942, the Russians circulated among all the foreign missions in Moscow a Note in which *inter alia* it referred to the Polish city of Lvov as being "among other Ukrainian cities."[4] A firm rebuke by all the Allies at this point might have had a salutary effect, but it was left to the Polish ambassador in Moscow, Professor Kot, to suggest that there had been some misunderstanding.[5]

Ignoring this objection, the Russians in turn protested at recent "offensive" references by the Polish Government to Red Army "occupation" of the Western Ukraine and Western White Ruthenia, areas which had in fact been Poland prior to 1939, but which the Soviet Union apparently had no intention of relinquishing after the war. As far as Lvov was concerned, the Soviet Foreign Ministry advised the Poles that they were unable to enter into discussion on the historical and legal bases of their contention that it was a Soviet city: Mr Molotov would refuse to accept any further Notes from the Poles asserting Polish claim to it.[6]

Just how far the Russians planned to go with their territorial demands became evident on January 26, when Stafford Cripps informed General Sikorski in London that from what he had privately learned in Moscow, Stalin planned to annex Germany's East Prussia to Poland in the west, but also to force back Poland's eastern frontier very considerably – in which latter context the "Curzon Line"[7] had even been mentioned in unofficial Russian circles. "In a word to push Poland from the East to the West," perceived Sikorski. He pointed out, "But that cannot be done without Polish consent."[8]

As the Polish general who had in 1920 reconquered these eastern territories of Poland, General Sikorski was without question likely to prove the most determined opponent to any kind of accord between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union that involved the granting of these territories to Russia. On August 29, 1918, Lenin and Karakhan had signed a decree declaring that all previous treaties regarding the division of Poland (in 1772, 1793 and 1795) were null and void. Soviet troops had occupied Vilna in 1919, and during 1920 they had swept the Polish armies to the very gates of Warsaw. It was General Sikorski's Fifth Army which had here stood firm

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against all odds and, in what was described at the time as one of the world's decisive battles, he thereby made an essential contribution to Marshal Pilsudski's counter-offensive which resulted in Polish victory. The Polish-Russian frontier had been determined by the Treaty of Riga in March 1921, in which Poland renounced all claim to about fifty-five per cent of her former area, but consolidated her right to what remained. A national hero, General Sikorski had been appointed Prime Minister soon after.

With some other Polish leader, such a revision of frontiers as the Soviet Union now, in 1942, projected might with difficulty have been possible; but Sikorski insisted that there could be no question of Poland alone emerging from the war with territorial losses.

At the end of January 1942, General Sikorski discussed the growing Russian threat to Polish sovereignty with Mr Churchill; in particular, he shrewdly advised the British Prime Minister to delay his proposed visit to Marshal Stalin until the Red Army was taking a beating again, as it soon surely would. The Germans, he advised, would launch their offensive in May or June, and probably drive down to the Caucasus, while relaxing their offensives against Moscow and Leningrad; when the Russians became desperate, said Sikorski, then was the time for Churchill to go to Moscow. He made no bones about his dismay at Mr Eden's negative accomplishments in Moscow recently. Churchill solemnly promised Sikorski that "as long as victory has not been achieved the problem of the future State boundaries in Europe will be in no way discussed."[9]

During the following weeks, Russian-controlled radio broadcast an increasing volume of propaganda laying claim to Poland's eastern territories, and General Sikorski began to suspect that Mr Churchill's spoken guarantee might not be enough.[10]

Indeed, at this time Mr Churchill was already talking very differently in his advice to the American President. On March 7, he suggested to Roosevelt that "the principles of the Atlantic Charter[11] ought not to be construed so as to deny Russia the frontiers she occupied when Germany attacked her." Russia's western frontier, it should be recalled, had by 1940 been extended to embrace both the Baltic States and that half of Poland that had been granted to the

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Soviet Union by Hitler's pact of 1939. On March 9, Churchill cabled to Marshal Stalin, "I have sent a message to President Roosevelt urging him to approve our signing the agreement with you about the frontiers of Russia at the end of the war." Roosevelt unexpectedly refused to approve, however, and he informed the Russians that he could not agree to any treaty, open or secret, about frontiers until the war was over. He did not give way on this principle until the spring of 1943.

In the meantime, rumour of the proposed Anglo-Soviet agreement had reached the Polish Government, and in a conversation with Mr Churchill and Anthony Eden on March 11, Sikorski gave expression to his fears, unaware of the recent communications that had already passed from Mr Churchill to Roosevelt and Stalin on this issue. The Polish Prime Minister protested that despite his own huge sacrifice in signing the Polish-Soviet Agreement of July 1941 – turning a blind eye on all the injustice of Russia's joint aggression with Hitler against Poland in 1939 – there was clear proof that the Soviet Union's hostile attitude to his country had not changed at all.

Learning that Britain now proposed to sign a treaty with the Soviet Union – an act he considered pure folly unless the Russians were prepared to make appropriate concessions in return – Sikorski warned that he "could not take it on his conscience" to accept the consequences of any British acceptance of all the Russian territorial demands. He did not want this to sound like a threat, he said, but warning had to be given at this moment to specify mutual responsibilities.

Mr Churchill said that his own assessment of Russia did not differ much from the General's, but he underlined that she was the only country that had fought against the Germans with success. "She had destroyed millions of German soldiers." Mr Churchill went on, "and at present the aim of the war seemed not so much victory, as the death or survival of our allied nations. Should Russia come to an agreement with the Reich, all would be lost. It must not happen. If Russia was victorious she would decide on her frontiers without consulting Great Britain; should she lose the war, the agreement would lose all its importance."

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Should the proposed British-Soviet agreement go ahead, General Sikorski nevertheless advised Mr Churchill, he would no longer be able to check the release of information already prepared (but suppressed so far on his express command) which "would expose the real face of the Russians and their brutal imperialism to the world opinion."[12]

Mr Churchill made no promises, but wished Sikorski a good journey – the Polish Prime Minister was flying to Washington in a few days' time. He said he hoped Sikorski would succeed in winning Roosevelt's support on the question of Polish frontiers.[13] In Washington, President Roosevelt showed that he was inclined to take a much firmer stand than Mr Churchill on this issue[14]: but while the United States Government decided not to recede from the principle that no territorial questions at all should be settled before the end of the war, the British Government indicated that it would proceed with its decision to enter into negotiations with the Soviet Union on post-war frontiers, although Mr Eden formally denied that this was their real purport.[15]

In the end it was solely because of General Sikorski's forceful objections that the Anglo-Soviet Treaty did not grant forthwith to the Russians the most sweeping territorial concessions, when it was signed on May 26, 1942.[16] In a private conversation with General Sikorski at the end of August, after weeks during which the Soviet Union (once again suffering severely as the Germans renewed their offensive – against the Caucasus as Sikorski had predicted) had not reiterated its claim to Polish territory, Mr Churchill promised to support the Polish claims when the Peace Conference came at the end of the war.[17]

Thus the first major crisis over the Polish eastern frontier appeared to have been weathered.

(ii)

In the same measure as the frontiers dispute seemed to have subsided, so a new anxiety had arisen in the minds of the Poles in London, an anxiety not about lands but about people. After the Red

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Army had occupied eastern Poland in 1939, more than a million Poles had been deported into the interior of the Soviet Union; and tens of thousands of officers and men of the former Polish Army had been interned, in various Russian prison camps. With the signing of the Polish-Soviet Treaty in 1941, the Poles had been allowed to raise on Russian soil a small army (which Sikorski expected to be built up to several divisions) under General Wladyslaw Anders, and to provide for the welfare of the Polish civilians, of whom the whereabouts of only about four-hundred thousand was known with any certainty.

During the year 1942, dark suspicions began to cloud the feelings of the Poles in London. In January, the Polish Foreign Minister had informed the Russian Ambassador to the Polish Government, Alexander Bogomolov, that no fewer than twelve generals, 94 colonels, 263 captains and some 7,800 officers had not yet been liberated; they had been in the three prisoner-of-war camps at Kozielsk, Starobielsk and Ostachkov in the Soviet Union.[18] Bogomolov had replied after two months that since all these prisoners had been freed under the terms of the 1941 agreements, it simply remained to find where they now were.[19] Every attempt by the Poles to secure the release of these Polish officers, who were urgently needed for the establishment of the Polish Army in Russia, met with failure; the Russians just would not co-operate on this score.

The last that the Poles had heard of these officers was that early in April 1940 the Soviet authorities had begun to disperse the prisoners in these camps, deporting them in batches every few days to unknown destinations in the region of Smolensk.[20] The trickle of letters from these Polish officer prisoners had then stopped completely, and nothing more had been heard of them since then.

If we follow the last entries in the diary kept by one such Polish officer, we may begin to suspect what had in fact become of these brave men who had fought so gallantly when their country was overrun by Hitler's and Stalin's armies. In his diary, the Polish major Adam Solski described what happened to his batch of prisoners after it had left the camp at Kozielsk on April 7, 1940:

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Sunday April 7, 1940: . . . After being searched at 2.45 P.M. we left the walls and the wire netting of the Kozielsk camp (the Gorki Rest House). At 4.55 P.M. (2.55 P.M. Polish time) we were put into prison trucks on the railway siding at Kozielsk. They say that in the U.S.S.R. fifty per cent of passenger coaches are prison trucks. Josef Kutyba, Captain Paul Szyfter, and some majors, lieutenant-colonels and captains are going with me – twelve in all. Accommodation for seven at most.

April 8, 1940: 3.30 A.M. departure from Kozielsk station, moving west, 9.30 A.M. at Jelnia station; since twelve we have been standing in a railway siding at Smolensk.

April 9,1940: In the morning some minutes before five A.M., reveille in the prison trucks and preparations for leaving. We are to go somewhere by car. What next?

Ever since dawn the day has run an exceptional course. Departure in prison coach in cell-like compartments (terrible). Taken somewhere into a wood, something like a country house. Here a special search. I was relieved of my watch which showed 6.30 (8.30) A.M., asked about a wedding ring. Roubles, belt and pocket knife taken away.[21]

This was the last entry the Polish major wrote in his diary: for the "wood" was Katyn Forest, and the whole world now knows what happened there.

more than two years had passed since then. During the winter of 1942, the German armies suffered their first great defeat at Stalingrad, and Russian prestige and power stood at their zenith. On January 16, 1943, the real storm over Poland broke at last and this time there was no denying that the initiative came from Moscow. Evidently exploiting Mr Churchill's temporary absence from England in North Africa, the Soviet Government sent a note to the Polish Embassy announcing that all inhabitants of the eastern part of Poland annexed by the U.S.S.R. in 1939 would henceforth be regarded as Soviet citizens, whether they were of Polish origin or not.[22] Polish inquiries about the fate of the Poles between one and two million in

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number, deported to Russia after the Soviet invasion in 1939 were now rejected with the observation that a foreign government had no right to information about "Soviet citizens." This trick could not be worked twice, however, and when the first mass graves of thousands of Polish officers were discovered soon afterwards on Russian soil, it was impossible for the Russians to claim that these corpses had posthumously become Soviet citizens too.

General Sikorski rejected the Soviet territorial demands outright, and addressing the National Council of Ministers in London on February 4, declared, "The principles of the Atlantic Charter and the terms of the Treaty of Riga are alone valid in determining the eastern frontiers of Poland." Four days later, the *Polish Daily* published a new statement by General Sikorski: "We are firmly convinced that the co-operation between Poland and Russia will develop in accordance with the Atlantic Charter signed by both Russia and Poland. I was convinced after my conversation with Stalin that he favours a great and powerful Poland. I hope, and with me the whole Polish nation, that this attitude of Russia's will not change."

During February 1943, however, the former West Ukrainian (i.e. Polish) politician, Alexander Korneychuk, published an article in the official Communist organ *Pravda*, in which for the first time Russian claims to eastern Poland were stated. When this article was officially distributed as a pamphlet by the Soviet Embassy in Washington, the Polish government in London could ignore the provocation no longer: they published an open statement that they considered the frontiers of September 1, 1939 to be the valid ones; this was the principle of the Atlantic Charter as well. This statement was reinforced by a declaration by the Polish National Council on the following day: the *status quo* could not be altered in any way by "unilateral and illegal actions on anybody's part" whether directed at Polish territory or Polish citizens, and whether the Polish citizens were within or without their sovereign territories.[23]

Again, the Poles saw the urgency of concerted Allied action *now*. In Washington, the Polish Ambassador suggested to President Roosevelt that it was vital for the United States to make a straightforward declaration that no unilateral act accomplished by any country

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against another during this war would be recognised by the United States Government. In London, the Polish Foreign Minister urged Mr Eden to make a similar declaration: had he not assured Sikorski in July 1941 that "His Majesty's Government do not recognise any territorial changes which have been effected in Poland since August 1939"? Raczynski further advised Mr Eden that there was great "excitement" amongst Poles both in Britain and the Middle East about the Russian provocations, and the supposedly weak and inadequate reactions by Sikorski's government to them: General Sikorski was contemplating a journey to review the Polish troops in the Middle East, presumably on account of the unrest out there.[24] Neither Washington nor London acted on the Polish suggestions, however.

On March 1,1943, Tass, the Soviet News Agency, commented at length that it should now be clear to all that the Polish Government in London did not recognise the "historic rights" of the Ukrainian and White Russian peoples to reunite with their Soviet "blood brothers."[25] The communiqué added that even the well known British Minister Lord Curzon, "despite his hostility to the Soviet Union" had recognised that Poland had no right to the former Ukrainian and White Russian territories.[26] This Tass statement of Poland's "imperialist claims" was roundly denounced by the Polish Government as absurd. They reiterated even now their readiness to seek an understanding based on mutually amicable relations.[27] The Russian answer to this was to appoint the Ukrainian communist Korneychuk Deputy-Commissar for Foreign Affairs some days later.

Once again, therefore, Mr Anthony Eden, Britain's Foreign Secretary, was the man of the hour, and all Poland's hopes were fastened on him as he crossed the Atlantic to discuss among other issues the Polish problem with his American counterparts. But in Poland's hour of need, Eden's actions seemed inexplicable. He must have realised on the very first day that diplomatic relations were restored between Poland and the Soviet Union, July 30, 1941, that the question of Poland's frontiers would eventually be a crucial one; and he had been determined that this millstone should not bear too heavily upon Great Britain's neck. He had assured the House of Commons on that day that the notes which had passed between himself

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and General Sikorski did not involve any guarantee of frontiers. But surely, one Labour M.P. had asked, the existing guarantees to Poland still held good? "There is, as I have said, no guarantee of frontiers," Mr Eden had retorted.[28]

This was just as well, for a few days before his departure, Mr Ivan Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador in London, advised Mr Eden that the Soviet Union wanted the Curzon Line with minor adjustments as its post-war frontier with Poland. In Washington, significantly, Mr Eden argued that Poland had very large ambitions after the war, and in this way he succeeded in implanting the seeds of strong suspicion in the minds of the Americans who, with seven million Poles among their population, had been potentially Sikorski's strongest allies.[29]

Why Mr Eden should have so misrepresented the Polish aims will never become clear: he appears to have believed that Soviet demands on Poland were very small, and as such Britain was prepared to accede to them. The records in Polish files, noting the conversations during mid-March 1943 between Polish Government representatives and the British Foreign Office's senior officers, show mounting concern at the Soviet pressure being exerted on Mr Eden; during these conversations, the British representatives urged the Poles, to no effect, to make concessions involving the surrender of some Polish territories to Russia.[30] No mention was made by the British that a nearly definitive agreement to Soviet claims *already existed*, and that in Washington Mr Eden had had no difficulty in persuading the Americans to accept these claims as well.

Eden told President Roosevelt – rightly or wrongly – that the Poles were saying that Poland alone would profit from this war, in that part of the world, since both Germany and Russia would be exhausted at its close; he even talked to Roosevelt about Poland's territorial "aspirations," and gave an exasperated description of how the Polish Prime Minister had wanted to name a cruiser – to be presented to him by the British – the *Lvov*. As this was one city on which Russia had strong designs, it seemed to Mr Eden a needless provocation, and the British Government had refused to countenance it.[31] Eden told Roosevelt that Poland wanted East Prussia and

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they both agreed that Poland should have it. But he warned the American President that Sikorski was forever conspiring with the small Balkan states promoting Polish ambitions; all this was known to the Russians, and in short he was doing the Polish cause more harm than good.[32]

When Eden left Washington, he had secured from a worried Roosevelt the private assurance that he did not intend to end up bargaining with Poland and other small states when it came to the Peace conference. Roosevelt gave Eden his private approval of Russian claims to the Curzon Line and the Baltic States, believing that compensated by additional westerly territories Poland would gain more than she would lose. But the seeds of suspicion may have already been sown, unknown to Sikorski, in Roosevelt's mind.

(iii)

By the beginning of April 1943 it was clear that Polish-Soviet relations were reaching their most critical pass. On April 7, Moscow Radio broadcast approvingly an article by two American professors of Polish origin, beseeching Sikorski's government to "take all possible action to end the anti-Soviet intrigues of reactionary Polish émigrés."[33] The article continued: "More than two million Poles owe their lives to the fact that they have sought the refuge of Soviet justice."

Neutral observers in London witnessed Mr Anthony Eden's return from North America and his subsequent report to Parliament; they had seen him call the Polish Foreign Minister, Count Raczynski, to him, and at the same time it was learned that Roosevelt had called the Polish Ambassador to see him in Washington.

In public, nobody knew what England's stand on Poland's eastern frontiers was likely to be. Neutral observers encountered a "wall of silence" in Whitehall.[34] From this it was wrongly deduced that the Foreign Office planned to leave the frontier question open until the war was over. Whether this was sound diplomacy would remain to be seen, for to non-belligerents it now seemed clear that Russia's

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territorial aspirations bore the characteristic traits of an "unbridled imperialism."

On April 12, President Roosevelt wrote to General Sikorski to be kept informed of the developing situation, and he specifically stressed that he was glad that the Polish Prime Minister was prepared to do all in his power to prevent "any rupture of Polish relations with the Soviet Union."[35] But apart from a vague promise that he was considering how he could help, Roosevelt's letter was a disappointment to Sikorski, who had wanted the Americans to make a firm stand on what seemed such a clear issue.

It was at this precise moment of mounting Polish disquietude, that Dr Joseph Goebbels's German Propaganda Ministry launched what was to prove its most triumphant offensive of the war. Early in February, the German authorities had found in the Katyn Forest strange mounds with young pine-trees sprouting on them, not far from Smolensk. The trees were about three years old. Underneath the pine-trees, the Germans found mass graves, and these were opened up as soon as the frosts had passed and the ground softened. The first grave was opened on March 29, and found to contain the bodies of some six hundred officers of the Polish Army. Several of the bodies, like that of Major Adam Solski, had diaries and notebooks on them, or still unposted letters. The last entries in them had been made on various dates between and April 6 and 20, 1940, when this region was still in Russian hands (over a year before the German invasion of Russia).[36] Over the next few days further mass graves had been investigated, and it was clear that here were the last resting places of not hundreds, but thousands of Polish officers murdered by Russian hands.

Late on April 13, Berlin Radio announced this find to the world: "A great pit was found, 28 metres long and 16 metres wide, filled with twelve layers of bodies of Polish officers, numbering about 3,000. They were clad in full military uniform, and while many of them had their hands tied, all of them had wounds in the back of their necks caused by pistol shots. The identification of the bodies will not cause great difficulties because of the mummifying property of the soil and because the Bolsheviks had left on the bodies the

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identity documents of the victims. It has already been ascertained that among the murdered is a General Smorawinski from Lublin." The Germans estimated that the total number of victims would be some ten thousand; neutral press correspondents had already inspected the graves.[37]

At eleven A.M. on April 15, the German reports, which had since become more insistent and circumstantial, were discussed by General Sikorski with members of his Cabinet. They decided to demand an explanation from the Soviet Embassy in London; to publish a statement drafted by the Foreign and Information Ministers, through the Polish Ministry of National Defence; and to approach the International Red Cross Committee in Geneva, asking them, as the agency responsible for prisoners of war, to investigate.[38]

The Soviet Union rejected the German allegations out of hand, and the Ministry of Information in Moscow cynically declared with mock horror that there could now be doubt no longer about the tragic fate of those former Polish prisoners of war "who had been engaged on construction work west of Smolensk in 1941," and who together with many Soviet citizens had fallen into German hands during the Russian retreats of that summer.[39] The Polish authorities gave little credence to this Moscow statement: if these details had been known to the Russians all along, why had they not told this to Sikorski and his representatives when they had repeatedly inquired the fate of the Polish officers?[40]

In a situation like this a real diplomat would have hidden feelings behind words. General Sikorski was no diplomat. His military upbringing and his Catholic honesty endowed him with a directness that was to be the despair of the British and American governments in the days that followed.[41] On April 15, General Sikorski came to lunch at No. 10 Downing-street, together with his Foreign Minister and Cadogan, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office.[42] During this meeting, the Polish Prime Minister handed to Mr Churchill a note about the German claims to have found the mass graves of Polish officers murdered by the Russians at Katyn.[43] According to the note taken by Count Raczynski, Mr Churchill admitted: "Alas, the German revelations are probably true. The Bolsheviks

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can be very cruel." But he hoped that Sikorski would see that quite often politics made it imperative that in the good of the common cause, such delicate matters should not be pressed too far. Churchill advised the Polish leader, "If they are dead, nothing you can do will bring them back."[44]

The rest of the conversation turned upon the question of Poland's eastern frontier. No mention was made to the Poles of the moves undertaken by Mr Eden already in Washington. Mr Churchill expressed his willingness to lend his good offices at an appropriate moment to strengthen the hand of the Polish ambassador in Moscow in his dealings with the Russians over the question of the dependants of the Polish forces who had now largely been evacuated from the Soviet Union, under General Anders, to the Middle East.[45] General Sikorski advised that there was a growing dismay among the Polish armed forces about Moscow's insistence (in its Note of January 16) on the validity of the frontier negotiated between Molotov and Ribbentrop in 1939, and on the Russian citizenship of all who had in November 1939 been even temporarily on the eastern side of that line. But the Polish Prime Minister again showed himself willing to yield on one point, if only to preserve the fiction of the solidarity of the United Nations. While he would have liked the Russians to withdraw their infamous Note of January 16 altogether, he said he was now prepared to accept a Soviet offer to evacuate the largest possible number of Polish families and children of his forces. On the frontier issue he showed himself as intransigent as ever.

Just how independent Sikorski proposed to be was shown on the very next day, for late on April 16, the Polish Ministry of National Defence issued to the news agencies the long communiqué agreed on the day before.[46] Moscow was openly challenged to reveal the truth about the missing Polish officers, and the International Red Cross was asked to mount a formal and neutral investigation into the massacre. This extraordinary step had been taken without any consultation with the British and American Governments, and these could now only watch horrified as events took their inevitable course. The American Ambassador to Sikorski's Government, Mr Drexel

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Biddle, cabled Cordell Hull in Washington, "Sikorski says that the German assertions thus far made regarding this 'ghastly story' unfortunately corroborate his information received through Polish Intelligence channels."[47] But neither Britain nor America showed even a temporary inclination to support the Polish demand. This should surely have been warning enough to the Polish Government that there were diplomatic movements afoot involving them, of which they were as yet unaware.

The Polish communiqué gave detailed evidence to support the belief that the Russians had murdered these officers. Over 180,000 Polish prisoners had been taken by the Russians during their September 1939 invasion of Poland, of which 10,000 had been officers, interned in camps near Smolensk, Kharkov and Kalinin. After the conclusion of the Polish-Soviet treaty in 1941 a small group of officers – less than four hundred – had arrived from a distant camp, but that was all. From the three main camps, 8,300 were missing, with another 7,600 N.C.O.s, other ranks and civilians of the Polish *intelligentsia*. These had never been seen again, and now the German discovery told the whole world why. In their communiqué, the Polish Government bitterly recalled the number of times that they had inquired both in writing and verbally about the fate of the officers.[48] Privately, General Sikorski now informed diplomats in London that during his December 1941 conversation with Stalin he had gained the definite impression from the Soviet leader's "marked evasiveness" that he was aware that a terrible fate had befallen the Polish officers.[49]

"We have become accustomed to the lies of German propaganda, and we understand the purpose behind its latest revelations," the Polish communiqué concluded. "In view however of abundant and detailed information concerning the discovery of the bodies of many thousands of Polish officers near Smolensk, and the categorical statement that they were murdered by the Soviet authorities in the spring of 1940, the necessity has arisen that the mass graves discovered should be investigated and the facts alleged verified by a competent international body such as the International Red Cross." General

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Sikorski's Government had therefore asked that institution to send a delegation to investigate the massacre.

This, as Dr Goebbels in Berlin realised at once, changed the whole affair fundamentally. He immediately contacted Hitler, who gave his permission for the plan Goebbels now put forward, namely that the Germans should also telegraph a request to the International Red Cross, asking it to collaborate in identifying the corpses. "In my opinion," wrote Goebbels that night, "something has thus been started which may have simply unimaginable repercussions . . ."[50]

The German request was officially announced on the following day.[51] The move was disconcerting for the Polish Government, and in a belated realisation that they had apparently fallen straight into a German trap they hastened to issue a second communiqué in London, denying the Germans any right to draw from Katyn arguments in their own defence; in this they drew particular attention to the known facts of German mass extermination of Poles in the camps at Maidanek and Treblinka, and they added a pathetic injunction forbidding anybody to make political capital of Poland's immense sacrifices.[52] But it was too late: through *Pravda*, an assault was launched on the integrity of the London Poles, who were now dubbed "Hitler's Polish Allies." A leading article urged all "right-thinking" Poles to turn away from "these" Poles, who were collaborating so eagerly with the hangmen of their compatriots.[53] And to dispel any doubts that might remain, Tass announced on April 21that the *Pravda* leading article completely reflected the attitude of the Soviet Government.[54]

On the same day Marshal Stalin wrote to Mr Churchill and President Roosevelt repeating the protest at the way the "campaign of calumny" initiated by the Nazis had been taken up by General Sikorski and inflated by his newspapers. Stalin added: "The fact that this campaign against the Soviet Union was launched simultaneously in the German and Polish press and is being conducted along similar lines does not leave any room for doubt that there is contact and collusion between Hitler – the enemy of the Allies – and the Sikorski Government in the conduct of the campaign."[55]

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In vain might Sikorski protest that the Germans had only imitated his initiative in appealing to Geneva, and for this he could not be answerable. The drama was moving to its conclusion, and both Churchill and Roosevelt seemed prepared to sacrifice the Polish Government in London if they believed it necessary to maintain East-West solidarity.

on april 22, news reached London from Warsaw that the Red Cross authorities there had also appealed to the International Red Cross to investigate the massacre. The Warsaw request stated: "On the basis of an examination of about three per cent of the disinterred corpses it can be established that these officers had been killed by bullets in the nape of the neck. From the identical type of wound it can be assumed that this was an execution by expert executioners. . . . From the papers and documents found on the bodies it must be accepted that the murders were committed between March and April 1940."[56]

The tide of evidence was rising against the Soviet Union, but despite this, when Ambassador Maisky brought Stalin's telegram to Mr Churchill on April 23, Churchill next day assured the Russian premier: "We shall certainly oppose vigorously any 'investigation' by the International Red Cross or any other body in any territory under German authority. Such investigation would be a fraud and its conclusions reached by terrorism." He hoped the Russians would reconsider their threat to "interrupt" relations with the Poles.[57] Of Sikorski he said in this telegram: "His position is one of great difficulty. Far from being pro-German or in league with them, he is in danger of being overthrown by the Poles who consider that he has not stood up sufficiently for his people against the Soviets. If he should go we should only get somebody worse."

Eden told General Sikorski that the Soviet Government was threatening to break off relations with them, and the British Foreign Secretary exerted the strongest possible pressure on the Polish Prime Minister to *withdraw* his request for an International Red Cross investigation; on Mr Churchill's instructions, he also urged Sikorski not to contact the Germans in any way – not that Sikorski

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had had any intention of so doing. As for withdrawing his appeal to Geneva, General Sikorski replied to Eden that he was unable to comply with the British suggestion, but that Mr Churchill might inform Stalin if he wished that the Poles were ready to "soft pedal" the Polish exile newspapers on the subject of the missing officers.[58]

In a personal and secret telegram on April 25, Churchill was able to inform Stalin that "as a result of Mr Eden's strong representations, Sikorski has undertaken not to press the request for the Red Cross investigation and will so inform the Red Cross authorities in Berne." He was convinced that General Sikorski had not been acting in collusion with the Germans, he said; and he promised Stalin that he, Mr Churchill, was also examining the possibility of "silencing" the Polish papers in London currently following an anti-Soviet line.[59]

Principal among the sceptics in London was the British Foreign Office, who believed for many months that the Katyn massacres had been concocted by the Germans alone; the F.O. continued to advise foreign ambassadors in London that it was strange that the Germans should only just have discovered the mass graves if they had been in the Smolensk region so long (since July 1941), and it was equally strange that the corpses should still have their identity tags and papers on them.[60] The British Ambassador in Moscow, Sir Archibald Clark Kerr, held no such illusions, and he felt that the Soviet Government's coming diplomatic break with the Polish Government was principally an attempt to cover up their guilt in the affair.[61]

the soviet charge that General Sikorski was actually in collusion with the Nazis was a terrible allegation to have made: it wounded the more deeply, since Sikorski was a liberal and a man of principle – his ideals had once already in his lifetime forced him into exile, when he was unable to agree with what he felt to be the anti-democratic nature of the Polish Government after Marshal Pilsudski's coup d'état in 1926; he was moreover inspired by an abysmal hatred of the Nazis, whether in or out of uniform, and he was, for example, one of the leading campaigners in support of the R.A.F. bombing operations against the German cities, which he believed necessary

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to save the peoples of German occupied countries from wholesale extermination.[62]

In any event, even before Mr Churchill's two telegrams reached Marshal Stalin, the International Red Cross announced that it would agree to investigate the Katyn massacre only if all parties involved – including the Russians – asked it to do so; this the Russians would never do, of course.[63] No mention of this Red Cross stipulation was made in the Moscow newspapers, and no move was made by the Russians to fulfil it, despite their earlier protestations that the Germans were responsible for the Katyn massacre.[64] The International Red Cross had found a very neat formula for evading responsibility: it was clear that there were better diplomats in Geneva than General Sikorski had at his disposal. The investigation of the Katyn massacre was never carried out.[65]

Mr Churchill's own post-war account of the Katyn affair is laconic. In his memoirs, he quotes the 1944 Russian inquiry into the massacre, which predictably proved that the Germans had committed the crime, and adds, "belief seems an act of faith."[66]

Then the last brief act was played. Shortly after midnight on Sunday, April 26, 1943, the Soviet Foreign Minister called the Polish Ambassador in Moscow to see him, and read out to him a Note announcing that the Soviet Government was "severing" diplomatic relations with the Polish Government in London.[67]

Neutral observers detected at once that the real reason for Russia's drastic action was not indignation over the planned Katyn investigation, but General Sikorski's intransigence over Russian claims to eastern Poland. Swiss newspapers reported that while officially there was no comment on the Russian move from Whitehall, unofficially it was admitted that the break had "torn a hole in the common front of the United Nations" which would have to be plugged and cemented over as soon as possible.[68]

This was Britain's preoccupation above all: "Anybody who has been forced into a World War to prevent Poland losing her sliver of territory in the Corridor in 1939 must after all make some effort to prevent their little protégé being skinned alive [*die ganze Haut über die Ohren gezogen*] in 1943. If this country is sacrificed, the non

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Anglo-Saxon world will trust the Atlantic Charter as much, or as little, as the European Order of the Axis."[69] This was the view of the anti-German *Basler Nachrichten* in a leading article pointing to Russia's real motives in aggravating the dispute.

(iv)

If the Polish underground army was anti-Soviet in its nature, it was certainly not pro-German in its alignment. It boasted a piquant sense of humour such as only a gallant but long-oppressed people can display.

Within a very few days of the German announcement of finding the Katyn graves, the underground army had printed thousands of wall posters, identical in style and language to those posted by the Nazi occupation authorities in the *Generalgouvernement* of Poland. Parallel Polish and German texts announced:

> *Proclamation No. 35 of the Generalgouvernement Administration (Central Propaganda Office):*
>
> At the suggestion of the Central Propaganda Office of the *Generalgouvernement*, a committee of representatives of the Polish public travelled to Smolensk on April 11 to see for themselves the bestialities perpetrated by the Soviet assassins of the Polish people. This was to prove to the Polish people the terrible fate awaiting them if the Soviets succeed in penetrating the Polish territories at present occupied by the Germans. . . .

So far, the poster followed the lines of a typical Nazi proclamation; but then it diverged along more original lines:

> . . . In this connection, the *Generalgouvernement* has ordered that a parallel excursion be organised to the concentration camp at Auschwitz for a committee of all ethnic groups living in Poland. The excursion is to prove how humanitarian, in comparison with the methods employed by the Bolsheviks, are the devices used to carry out the mass extermination of the Polish peo-

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ple. German science has performed marvels for European culture here; instead of a brutal massacre of the inconvenient populace, in Auschwitz one can see the gas and vapour chambers, electric plates, etc., whereby thousands of Poles can be assisted from life to death most rapidly, and in a manner which does honour to the whole German nation.

It will suffice to indicate that the crematorium alone can handle 3,000 corpses every day. During the summer months excursions are also being planned by special train to the concentration camps at Mauthausen, Oranienburg, Dachau, Ravensbrück and elsewhere.[70]

The text of this morbid poster was cabled to Berlin by a Counter-Intelligence unit in Cracow on April 20, 1943. Admiral Canaris arranged for copies to be distributed under a "secret" classification, but on no account was it to be leaked out to the press, as it might completely reverse the propaganda effect of Katyn.

As it was, the propaganda triumph for the Germans was now complete. Dr Goebbels withheld the news of the Soviet Union's break with Poland for one day while he considered how best to exploit it, and then released it to the German newspapers on April 28 "Foreign commentators marvel at the extraordinary cleverness with which we have been able to convert the Katyn incident into a highly political question," he confided to his diary.[71] The Germans had succeeded in discrediting the Soviet Government in the eyes of the world and briefly raised the spectre of a ruthless Bolshevik monster rampaging across the territories of Western civilisation; moreover they had forged the unwilling General Sikorski into a tool with which they now had a slender chance of prising the Great Powers out of their unholy Alliance with Russia. For the Germans, the Polish Prime Minister was now worth his weight in gold. What further mischief could they set him to?

On April 22, Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer of the S.S., wrote to the German Foreign Minister Joachim Ribbentrop: "A thought has occurred to me in this Katyn Forest affair – whether we would not put the Poles in a hideous position if we invited Herr Sikorski to

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fly to Katyn, with the assurance of safe conduct via Spain, and with any escort he cares to choose, to satisfy himself of the facts? This is just a thought of mine, and it may be impossible to put it into practice; but I wanted to put it to you."[72]

In fact the idea had come not from Himmler but from Gauleiter Bohle, head of the Party's Foreign Organisation, a week before. Bohle had predicted that the enemy governments would forbid Sikorski to accept such an invitation, but he thought that the propaganda effect of such an offer would be enormous, particularly as Sikorski had experienced such a stony reception to all his questions in the Kremlin about the whereabouts of the missing Polish officer prisoners.[73]

Attractive though the scheme was, Ribbentrop rejected it: "I admit that from the propaganda point of view this idea is at first sight somewhat tempting," he wrote to Himmler on April 26, "but the basic principles of our treatment of the Polish problem, which make impossible any kind of contact with the head of the Polish Government in exile, are so important that they should not be relaxed on account of what might well be quite a tempting propaganda operation."[74]

It should be mentioned here that although there is further correspondence in the S.S. and Himmler's files about the results of the Katyn investigations by foreign and neutral forensic experts, and about the White Book subsequently published by the Germans in the autumn of 1943, there are no further references whatsoever to General Sikorski.[75]

For the Germans, the final proof of the efficacy of their existing policy came early in May, when two leading members of the Polish émigré community in France, including a former Polish Finance Minister, approached the German embassy in Paris with an offer to form a National Committee to collaborate with the Germans in establishing a Government in Poland; so Katyn had at last brought forth a "Quisling" from the Polish people.[76] While the German Foreign Ministry ruled that the formation of a Polish National Committee was out of the question,[77] of the propaganda effect of Katyn there was now no doubt. The Swedish Foreign Minister privately

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told an Italian diplomat that the discovery of the mass graves had made an extraordinary impression on American public opinion, and this would have serious political consequences.[78] This Intelligence was duly passed on to Ribbentrop's office in Berlin.

(v)

Incredibly, the British and American governments still failed to realise the political stakes for which the Soviet Union was really playing – the unquestioning acceptance of Russian demands on Polish territory and the Baltic States. Still believing that the Russian dissatisfaction with General Sikorski's Government was purely temporary – i.e., over Katyn – they sought solace in the Russian use of the word "interrupt" instead of "break off" relations with Poland. (As if there could be any doubting the Russian intentions now. Had the displeasure been purely temporary, the Russians would have recalled their Ambassador to the Polish Government, not "interrupted" their relations.)

Neutrals saw the real picture more clearly: if any one word in the Russian declarations could be stressed, they felt it was the Russian refusal to work with "this" Polish Government.[79] Had they prepared an alternative one in Moscow, then? This danger was also stressed in a despatch to Washington from the American Ambassador in Moscow.[80] (He had already reported two weeks before that there were reliable indications that the Soviet Army was raising a special army of one and a half million men for the occupation of new territory.[81]) On April 30, Mr Churchill advised Stalin that Dr Goebbels was suggesting that Moscow intended to establish a Polish Government of its own; he warned that Britain would be unable to recognise such a government.[82]

For the next four weeks the British and American governments tried to visualise some form of tame Polish Government in London that would not give the Russians cause for more offence. But all of their polite suggestions ran into the firm opposition of General Sikorski himself. In particular, he refused to replace his Information Minister, Professor Kot, who as a former Ambassador in Mos-

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cow was now one of the most intransigent opponents of *rapprochement* with the Russians.[83]

Mr Churchill advised Stalin that Sikorski was "far the most helpful man you or we are likely to find for the purposes of the common cause."[84] On the same day, he rebuked Ambassador Maisky personally for a remark about the "émigré character" of Sikorski's Government, and very properly pointed out that that character was "not unconnected" with the joint Nazi-Soviet occupation of Poland in 1939. Maisky shamelessly referred to Poland as a country of 20 millions next door to a country of 200 millions, a phrase to chill the spine of any statesman less susceptible to threats than Churchill.[85]

A mounting press campaign began against General Sikorski. *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *News Chronicle*, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail* all published articles of more or less urgency, demanding that he refashion his Cabinet as Moscow was demanding. General Sikorski showed no signs of complying. On April 30, Mr Eden bearded him personally with the insistent demand that he bow to Moscow's requirements.[86] Eden went so far as to urge Sikorski to make a published statement withdrawing his government's request for an International Red Cross investigation of Katyn, and to accuse the Germans of responsibility. Sikorski replied that this he would not do.

Broadcasting on the Polish National Day, three days later, General Sikorski grimly said, "There are limits on servility, beyond which no Polish citizen will step."[87] As he explained in a personal letter to President Roosevelt on the same day, he realised that his appeal to Geneva might be criticised in some quarters, but in view of the fact that many Poles, both in England and the Middle East, had near relatives or comrades who had been killed in the massacre it was very difficult for him to ignore the news.[88] He made a final appeal for American support for Poland in its hour of need; but Roosevelt kept quiet, and made no reply for over a month to him.

On May 4 Stalin told Churchill, "The Polish Government is surrounded by such a vast pro-Hitler following, and Sikorski is so helpless and browbeaten that there is no certainty at all of his being able to remain loyal in relations with the Soviet Union even granting

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that he wants to be loyal."[89] But the Allies continued to play into his hands. Both the Foreign Office and the State Department were reluctant to *force* Sikorski to change his Government for one less anti-Soviet. This would, the American Secretary of State believed, create an "unfortunate precedent." It would also be inadvisable, they advised their Ambassador to Sikorski's Government, to get drawn into any negotiations on future frontiers at the present stage of the war.[90] On both counts, the British and American Ambassadors in Moscow were at variance with their administrations; they cabled that unless the "basic" causes of the break in Polish-Russian relations – the frontier dispute and the Polish Government's character – was resolved, there was no prospect whatsoever of lasting success.[91] They felt that the Allies' first preoccupation must be to prevail upon the Polish Prime Minister to eliminate from his Government the elements making harmony with the Soviet Union impossible. But the British at least must have recognised that so long as the eastern territories of Poland were at stake, the most powerful blight on Polish-Soviet harmony might become General Sikorski himself.

The Russians were more forthright in their demands, and at least once talked of the need to replace the whole Sikorski Government by one more friendly to the Soviet Union.[92] Ambassador Maisky also let it be known to General Sikorski that he felt that Professor Kot and others of an anti-Soviet nature should be replaced, to which Sikorski replied with a rare brand of humour, through the same intermediary, that this might be possible provided that Mr Molotov was in turn replaced by somebody less anti-Polish.[93] Mr Churchill telegraphed Marshal Stalin that he agreed that the Polish Government was susceptible of improvement, and added: "I think like you that Sikorski and some others should in any event be retained."[94] On the same day, Mr Eden informed Maisky that General Sikorski was to make a trip to the Middle East to review his forces there; the British Government would not at this time force a reorganisation of the Polish Government in London, but, he assured Maisky, changes would be taking place.[95]

General Sikorski prepared to leave London in the fourth week of May. Just before he left, he wrote one final letter to Mr Churchill,

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who had now returned from a trip to America. Sikorski sent to Churchill a document from occupied Poland proving that there was complete agreement there with his policies. He expressed his resolute desire that Polish forces should participate in the invasion of the Continent when it came: "As you know," he concluded, "I am leaving shortly for the Middle East to inspect the Polish forces in those parts, but before my departure I feel I must congratulate you with all my heart on your American speeches. I am sure you will like to know that all Poles, those who fight and suffer in Poland as well as those who are within the orbit of the British Empire, put an almost mystic trust in Great Britain and in your leadership."[96]

His departure from London was greeted with relief in diplomatic circles, for the truth was that Poland was now once again the hub about which international discord was beginning to revolve, and at the centre of that hub stood Sikorski, unwavering and unyielding in his honourable stand. The Soviet Union's policies, which had been viewed with increasing suspicion by even the most optimistic statesmen among the Allies since 1941, had at last become clear: Russia wanted the Baltic States, which Poland had always considered as being in her own sphere of interest; and she wanted the Curzon Line, which none of the Polish Government, least of all General Sikorski, was prepared to accept. She had used the pretext of Katyn to sever her relations with the London Poles, to clear the way for a communist-sponsored government in Poland after the war, which would yield unquestioningly to Russian demands. To combat these Russian ambitions, the British Government had offered only appeasement: not the open and discomfiting appeasement of 1938, but appeasement behind closed doors, the details of which were still not disclosed to those who were most concerned – the Poles.

Even so, in reviewing this period from 1941 until the end of the spring of 1943, it is not easy even with the immeasurable benefit of hindsight to show at which moment of time, or in which way, the British Government could have acted differently. Sikorski would have said that it was in making unnecessary concessions to the Russians when we were comparatively strong, and in not requiring commensurate returns; and in expecting to negotiate on the same amicable

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basis when the situation was reversed, as it was in 1943, when Russian might was in its ascendancy. The truth is probably close to this – in the land of "grey," rather than of black or white. To depict the British Ministers concerned in these hidden dealings as villains, solely because in these tragic circumstances they did not act in accordance with their first declared principles, would be to shed every vestige of charity fitting in a historian.

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2: Six weeks too Soon

Two Polish ministers had tried to dissuade General Sikorski from making his trip to the Middle East, fearing that he might never return alive to England: both the Polish and the British authorities had reports that General Anders' Army was a hotbed of anti-Sikorski feeling, in consequence of his earlier compromising stand towards the Soviet Union.[1] There seemed a real danger that he might be struck down by some fanatic from within the Polish army's ranks. Others believed that Sikorski had cause to fear more than just his Polish enemies. The public relations officer of the Polish Ministry of Defence in London, Stanislaw Strumph-Wojtkiewicz, has written that just before the Polish Prime Minister's departure from England, a cypher officer at the War Office warned that under no circumstances should Sikorski go to the Middle East.[2] All these ill-omens were ignored, and on May 24, 1943 the journey to the Middle East began.

After a one-hour conference with Mr Eden at the Foreign Office, and a lunch at the Dorchester with the Polish deputy Prime Minister Stanislaw Mikolajczyk and four of his Ministers – Kot, Kwapinski, Seyda and Popiel – General Sikorski was accompanied by a small party of Polish leaders to Paddington railway station, where he was to take a train to the R.A.F. Transport Command airfield at Lyneham, near Bristol. (The original plan had been to fly to Lyneham from

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Hendon airport in London, but this had been dropped because of unfavourable weather conditions.[3]) General Kukiel, the Minister of Defence, saw the party off. Just before the train left, Sikorski complained of feeling slightly unwell – he had a heart ailment which was troubling him. Kukiel drew General Sikorski's daughter, Madame Zofia Lesniowska, aside and asked her whether she knew what to do should this ailment worsen. Madame Lesniowska replied that she was well prepared, she had a phial of drops and also some injections.[4] At twelve minutes past four, the train pulled out of Paddington station, and the journey from which Sikorski and his daughter would never return had begun.

They left Lyneham in an American-made bomber of the Consolidated-Vultee Liberator type; it bore the registration number AL523, a number with which the reader will become familiar during the later stages of this narrative, for it was in this aircraft that the Polish Prime Minister was subsequently killed.[5] The aircraft was well handled by its pilot, a highly experienced Flight Lieutenant of the Czechoslovakian Air Force, Edward Maks Prchal. He took off twenty minutes after midnight in complete darkness and pouring rain, and headed out over the Atlantic, giving the German-held coast of Europe a wide berth.[6] As the plane neared Gibraltar, the weather cleared, and by the time the plane touched down on the brief airstrip laid out behind the Rock, at 9.30 A.M. on May 25, the sun was shining brightly.

the governor of Gibraltar, General Mason-Macfarlane, was waiting on the airstrip with the senior Fortress officers, and Sikorski's party were taken to Gibraltar's Government House – "The Convent" – for breakfast and talks with the Polish mission there.[7] The latter's officers he warned that he planned to return the same way in about six weeks' time, and would like to spend the night in Gibraltar once again to meet the Polish soldiers and give fresh instructions to the Mission, whose principal duty was the evacuation of Polish escapees from Spain and northern Africa.[8]

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Sikorski and the British Governor were close friends. During the evening they inspected a party of Polish officers and men, and arranged with the R.A.F. to continue his flight to Cairo on the following morning.

news of Sikorski's safe arrival at the Gibraltar staging post had reached his colleagues in London at six o'clock on the evening of May 25. On the following day, an incident occurred which was, to say the least, a macabre omen.

Throughout the morning, those Ministers close to Sikorski had waited anxiously in their offices for the news of his safe arrival in Cairo to come in. Among them was Minister Karol Popiel, sitting in his office at the Polish Ministry of Works in Clifford-street, London W.1. Mr Mikolajczyk had promised to let him know as soon as news arrived. Towards noon, Popiel's telephone rang and he heard a voice inquire in good Polish: "Am I speaking to Minister Popiel?"

Learning that Minister Popiel was on the line, the voice continued, rather quickly: "Have you heard the news, Minister? General Sikorski's plane has crashed at Gibraltar, and all its passengers have been killed."

Popiel's first reaction was that somebody was playing some foolish prank, and he angrily asked, "What's this rubbish that you're saying . . . and who *are* you, anyway?" But the voice said no more, and the unknown caller hung up his telephone.

Convinced that somebody had a sick sense of humour, or was trying to intimidate them, Popiel nevertheless telephoned Mikolajczyk to ask whether there was any news of Sikorski's arrival. Mikolajczyk informed him that he and General Modelski, the Deputy Minister of Defence, had received identical telephone calls within the last few minutes. The Deputy Prime Minister communicated with the British authorities, full of anxiety about Sikorski's fate; he was reassured that General Sikorski had safely left Gibraltar and was on his way to North Africa at that moment.[9] The truth was that nothing had befallen the Liberator yet; it was not for another six

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weeks that General Sikorski and all his companions were to die in the aircraft accident at Gibraltar.

(ii)

Who might sabotage an Allied aircraft in Gibraltar? Inevitably, one's thoughts turned to the German *Abwehr*, the military Intelligence organisation run for the German High Command by Admiral Canaris. The *Abwehr's* Section II, commanded by General Erwin Lahousen, was the most widely established sabotage organisation, landing saboteurs in America by submarine, parachuting them into England under cover of simultaneous bombing raids on towns nearby, and infiltrating them by other means equipped to destroy enemy war installations and escape detection as best they could.

German sabotage operations in Gibraltar were conducted by the *Abwehr* from a headquarters within Spain, where such efforts were co-ordinated by a Major Rudloff and directed by Lieutenant Hummel. They and their paid employees waged a constant war of harassment on the British authorities on the Rock, sabotaging the power station, fuel dumps, parked aircraft, food stores and other targets in a campaign which was ordered by Berlin to halt only in June 1941 when one German saboteur was caught and dealt with in the traditional way. Despite this, sabotage operations against shipping reached a climax early in 1942, when in the course of British anti-sabotage measures, several hundred Spanish workers were deported.[10]

Throughout 1942, the *Abwehr* had nonetheless contrived to smuggle adequate supplies of explosives into the British colony by means of false bottoms in motor cars and their agents had placed a series of time bombs in merchant and naval vessels resulting in several being sunk.[11] In September 1942, however, Hummel was ordered to Berlin and instructed by Canaris that attacks on the Rock itself had to stop for the time being, apparently for political reasons.[12]

It was not until June 1, 1943, a week after the mysterious telephone call to Minister Popiel, that the German *Abwehr* headquar-

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ters lifted its restriction on sabotage operations in Gibraltar proper. At a Berlin conference between Admiral Canaris and Raeder's special representative Admiral Weichold on that day – the main topic was *Abwehr* work in Iceland – the possibilities of resuming sabotage operations against Gibraltar were examined. Weichold proposed to Canaris that such operations should be directed against the inner Fortress harbour, the Bay of Gibraltar and outside territorial waters; the first two proposals were agreed, but the latter was rejected from political considerations.[13]

A week later, Lieutenant Hummel was again summoned to Berlin from Spain and informed that Admiral Canaris was willing to put up half a million *pesetas* for sabotage work in the Gibraltar arsenal tunnels in the main Rock complex.[14] At this point, a curtain descends on the activities of the *Abwehr* on the Iberian peninsula.

general sikorski's life was now the subject of growing anxiety. Strong fears were being expressed in London about his safety. Two ministers had already written him a joint letter urging him to abandon his tour of the Middle East, as they feared he was exposing himself to too much danger: for Poland he was irreplaceable. From occupied Poland itself came messages urging that the Prime Minister take care.[15] To his friends, he confided that he had travelled so much, and had "had so much good luck" that he probably should not take further risks.[16] One reason why he had taken his only child, Zofia, with him was that he needed her for medical first aid.[17] Moreover, she was head of the Polish Women's Auxiliary, and she was to inspect Polish women's units in the Middle East. Her husband was in captivity in a German prison camp. General Sikorski knew that death could strike him at any moment on this tour, and it was common knowledge that he had deposited in London a document indicating the course he wished the Polish Government to follow should he die.[18]

By the last week in June, General Sikorski's tour was nearly complete and, despite a week's respite in Beirut, he was physically a very tired man: the heat and strain had proven too much for him. Radio

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Moscow was keeping up the pressure of the campaign against Poland's eastern territories: on June 20, it broadcast a statement by a "Union of Polish Patriots in the Soviet Union" laying claim to German and Czechoslovakian territories, and declaring that Poland wanted "no inch of Ukrainian, White Russian or Lithuanian ground."[19] To this, the *Polish Daily* in London replied that the Polish Government in London had had no such designs in the first place, but that it would never give up either Lvov or Vilna. It added, "The so-called Union of Polish Patriots in Moscow is a fiction whose continued existence is an obstacle to Polish-Soviet co-operation."

On June 23, General Sikorski called a secret conference of all the Polish military and political leaders in the Middle East: he reassured them that the Polish Government was in possession of a British guarantee that Britain would never accept any territorial changes. But by now he had received a reply from President Roosevelt to his letter many weeks before, and it must have been a bitter disappointment to him: the President talked in general terms of his desire that Poland should work together with the Soviet Union, and of his aspirations for "victory and a lasting peace based on justice and goodwill," but the letter's contents were vague and there was no firm guarantee of Poland's frontiers after the war.[20] General Sikorski could not have known of Eden's warning to Roosevelt about Poland's post-war territorial "aspirations"; he kept the contents of this letter a close secret, even amongst his friends.

As he toured the units of his Polish troops, Sikorski made speech after speech and pushed out of his mind his fear of what was to happen when the war was over. To Polish troops encamped in Palestine he recalled how it had been said of him that he was the first to hold aloft the banner of Poland: "That is true, of course. But it is also true that before the fall of France, four Polish military formations had already been raised and these had honoured the name of Poland in heroic battle. That was the first milestone in our fight for Poland. The second was my historic encounter with Mr Winston Churchill after the collapse of France, when I told him we wanted to carry on with the fight. Churchill impulsively grasped my hand and

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said that for us this was as if we had formed an unwritten alliance in life and death."

Sikorski told his troops of how Britain had thereupon provided the ships necessary to evacuate the Polish units from France. The "third milestone" had been the Treaty he had signed with the Soviet Union, a treaty dictated by the requirements of state. He added: "I can assure you that we have done nothing that could be construed as a breach of that Treaty. It is thanks to that Treaty that you soldiers of Poland are here today."[21]

A few days later, in Cairo again, he announced that a completely motorised Polish Army would "soon be fighting on the battlefields of Europe." All roads to Poland ran through those battlefields, he added: "We Poles are on our way back to the Fatherland." At a press conference, he reaffirmed that the Polish Government still believed in an Eastern European federation: close federation with Czechoslovakia and looser ties with the Yugoslavs and Greeks; these would serve to restrain Germany and promote co-operation with the Soviet Union.[22] "Poland will do nothing detrimental to the resumption of relations with the Soviet Union," he said. "Our relationship is based on the principles set down in our Treaty of December 1941, which both Stalin and I signed."[23]

But in private talks with Anders and other Polish officers in Cairo, he stated that he now realised that the Soviet Union had no intention of honouring its agreements with the Poles, and that Marshal Stalin's long-term aims were diametrically opposed to their own.[24] Poland must look to Britain and America alone to safeguard her independence.

To all those who came into contact with General Sikorski in Cairo, it was obvious that he was approaching complete physical exhaustion. The Polish consul there, Minister Tadeusz Zazulinski, saw this tiredness manifest in Sikorski's air of gloomy foreboding, an air which was shared by his daughter. Madame Lesniowska confided to the Minister that she seriously feared that she was going to be killed and die by drowning, and that her body would be consumed by the fishes of the sea. General Sikorski loudly reproached himself for

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having allowed his daughter to accompany him, and added in some agitation that his responsibility to her mother was overwhelming.

However one may judge these *post facto* recollections, of one thing all were certain: the Polish leader needed peace and rest. Minister Zazulinski urged Sikorski to go away for a few days to rest and see the wonderful excavations at Luxor and Aswan. Sikorski accepted this proposal, made on June 29, gratefully, but no sooner had it been announced through Reuter and other agencies that he was postponing his proposed return to England, than word arrived from London which led him to change his plans.[25]

During a luncheon with Lord Moyne on June 30, a telegram arrived from Winston Churchill which read:

> Am delighted to hear from Casey of general success of your visit. Should be glad to welcome you home. – churchill.

this the Poles took, rightly or wrongly, as an "impatient" recall to London.[26] At eight o'clock that night, the same Liberator as had carried the Polish party to the Middle East, AL523, took off from Gibraltar in the capable hands of Flight Lieutenant J. E. F. Ware, and set course for Cairo to prepare to pick up the General and his colleagues. Flight Lieutenant Prchal and his ill-fated crew were already there: they had flown out from Lyneham on June 27, spent the night in Gibraltar, and reached Cairo late on June 28, in Prchal's usual Liberator, AL616.[27] All the ingredients of General Sikorski's appointment with eternity were now gathered at Cairo, waiting for him to depart.

The two Prime Ministers were now at opposite ends of the scale of their fortunes: while Sikorski had been unhappily flying from one unit to the next in the Middle East, inspecting his troops and seeking to explain to them what he himself could not comprehend, Mr Winston Churchill was exulting in London's praise. The British newspapers had forgotten about General Sikorski; there was no mention of Katyn, let alone the Polish frontiers. In the fortnight

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following April 27, Sikorski's name had figured for seven days in British newspapers; in the last half of June it figured only once.[28]

On Wednesday, June 30, as Sikorski was having Churchill's telegram translated to him in Cairo, Mr Churchill was driven through cheering crowds of Londoners to the heavily bombed City, where he was to receive the Freedom of the City in the Guildhall. They were not mere passers-by who crowded every street – they were men in overalls, soldiers in uniform and people from every Allied country, all of whom had poured into the Empire's capital to see their leader.[29] Churchill, cigar-smoking and beaming, was in a brilliant mood and received a tremendous ovation after his speech. He knew that within a very few days Allied troops would be landing on enemy territory, in Sicily, and a new front would be opening against the Axis.

In the field of international affairs, only Poland remained to cloud the horizon. Moscow had by now announced that it was establishing a Polish National Congress. But then on July 1, out of the blue, the Vatican quietly announced that it was granting diplomatic recognition to Sikorski's Government – the first of the exile Governments to receive a Vatican *chargé d'affaires*.[30] In Cairo, General Sikorski held a last press conference, speaking proudly of all the Polish troops he had visited: "I am glad to tell you that I shall myself be in command of the first troops to enter Poland," he announced.[31]

(iii)

Sikorski's departure from Cairo was set down for July 3, 1943. A Polish journalist who spoke to him on the day before found him near exhaustion, and extremely jumpy. Sikorski caught sight of his daughter, who had just entered the hotel laden with parcels from a shopping expedition, and inquired irritably whether she intended to take the Sphinx and Cheops pyramid in the car with them as well.[32] Soon afterwards an R.A.F. officer came to weigh all the Polish party's baggage, a detail of no small importance for the safety of the

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aircraft; every item had to be properly stowed so as not to upset the aircraft's trim.[33]

Through the Polish Consul, General Sikorski asked one favour of the R.A.F.: he had been greatly impressed by the skill and experience of the R.A.F. pilot who had flown him out from England, Flight Lieutenant Edward Prchal: could he have the same pilot to fly him back? The favour was granted, and Prchal and his crew were detailed by R.A.F. Transport Command to fly Sikorski's party back to England, in the same Liberator, AL523, as had flown them out. To mark his esteem of Prchal, General Sikorski procured a silver cigarette case in Cairo, and had it inscribed and presented to the officer.[34] That Prchal was the pilot for the return flight purely as the consequence of a specific request from Sikorski is one of the main factors in dismissing the credibility of certain allegations that followed the disaster.

Sikorski rose at three A.M. on July 3, determined to complete his correspondence and finish signing papers in Cairo before the heat of the day made it impossible. After a small breakfast, he and all his party left for the desert airfield "Cairo West" at five A.M. General Anders had fallen ill with an attack of malaria on the previous day, and he was unable to accompany Sikorski to the plane. As the party boarded the waiting Liberator, the Polish Prime Minister scribbled a last friendly note to Anders: "I wish you a speedy recovery, General, and good work in Poland's cause."[35] Minutes later, the Liberator had taken off, and begun its long flight to Gibraltar.

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PART TWO:
THE DISASTER

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3: Farce and Tragedy

In Gibraltar, the Governor's military assistant, Major Anthony Quayle, telephoned the local Polish forces liaison officer, Lieutenant Ludwik Lubienski, and asked him to call round at the Governor's Palace at once. As the Polish lieutenant entered the Governor's office, the latter said, "Lubienski, I am in a spot. I have just heard from Cairo that General Sikorski is on his way, and will be arriving here this afternoon. He has asked if he can stay here overnight before flying on to London tomorrow evening."

The difficulty was, said General Mason-Macfarlane, that Whitehall had, as usual, put its foot in it again: although the Russians had broken off diplomatic relations with the Polish Government, the Foreign Office had cabled him that the Russian Ambassador would be arriving in Gibraltar during the afternoon as well, and he and his party would also like to spend the night in Government House.[1] Macfarlane could hardly play host to both the Polish and the Russian parties; indeed if they should chance to meet under his roof it would produce a most embarrassing scene. The result was a Whitehall farce without precedent in diplomacy, and a hilarious opening to a day that was to end in tragedy.

The British Governor had no difficulty in choosing which of the two prospective guests he preferred. To those of whom he disapproved he could be very uncompromising: when General Montgomery had once passed through Gibraltar, Macfarlane had stayed in bed on a pretext rather than have to greet a man he considered

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odious.[2] But he had a genuine and warm regard for Sikorski, while his feelings towards Russia had been chilled during his period as head of Britain's Military Mission in Moscow; and he had a particular dislike of Ivan Maisky, the ambassador concerned.[3]

He therefore informed Lubienski that he intended to cable London that he could not put up the Russian ambassador after all as the Governor's Palace was full; he would suggest that Maisky's arrival should be postponed until breakfast time on the following morning, Sunday, July 4.[4] He could then fly straight on to Cairo a few hours after his arrival. General Sikorski was due to arrive at 6.30 P.M. on this Saturday afternoon; General Mason-Macfarlane asked Lubienski to meet him on the airfield then.

macfarlane was a brilliant but somewhat erratic officer, whose genius lay primarily in his Intelligence and diplomatic accomplishments.[5] His papers and partly completed memoirs reveal him first as military attaché in a succession of key capitals of European prewar intrigue, then as the Director of Military Intelligence in France in 1940, and latterly as the head of the British Military Mission in Moscow, appointed immediately after the German invasion in June 1941.

Unfortunately, he was accident-prone: as a youth he had broken his neck while playing polo, and as military attaché in Hungary he had suffered a further crippling spinal injury in a car accident. At the time of Sikorski's arrival in Gibraltar, he was already aware of a slow and creeping paralysis in his arms and legs. He had a nervous mannerism of flicking all his fingers, as though to establish that he could still feel that they were there. He could not lift his feet properly, but shuffled along with his toes turned in, and his head slouched forward on his broken neck. He fought these disabilities and pain with incredible fortitude. Every guest of importance he insisted on showing over the Rock and its labyrinth of tunnels himself; he stumbled and fell many times, and seldom returned without bleeding knees.

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That he had mastered such handicaps and been appointed Governor of one of Britain's proudest colonies was proof of his integrity. One does not have to search far for the reasons for the close bonds that linked General Sikorski and General Mason-Macfarlane; but that Macfarlane's revered hero was shortly to be killed on his own territory was a blow which even he could scarcely have foreseen as he drove down to the airfield behind the Rock, and waited for the R.A.F. Liberator to arrive.

By 6.30 P.M., Mason-Macfarlane, his A.O.C. Air Commodore Simpson, Admiral Edward-Collins, Lieutenant Lubienski and a host of other officers had gathered on the tarmac. Not long afterwards, the heavy bomber aircraft appeared, and at 6.37 P.M. it made a perfect landing on the short runway. Simpson commented approvingly that its pilot must be exceptionally experienced, for he had timed the heavy plane's landing to perfection.[6] The bomber taxied off the runway, and came to rest not far from where the Governor and his party were standing, its engines cutting out one by one and whirring to a stop.

The hatch in the rear of the aircraft opened, and General Sikorski emerged, followed by his daughter and the five other Poles of his party; Madame Lesniowska was dressed in her military uniform. The General walked down the line of waiting officers, and exchanged friendly greetings with Macfarlane and his adjutants.[7] Macfarlane showed the way to the waiting cars, and the whole party climbed in. As they drove off, Sikorski asked the Governor if his party could stay overnight as they were very tired (he himself had been up and at work since three o'clock that morning). Macfarlane advised him that everything had been put in hand: "My house is at your disposal."

As they drove away, they paid little attention to the two British civilians who left the plane; these had been taken aboard at Cairo, with Sikorski's permission, together with a British officer, Brigadier Whiteley, who had nothing to do with his party. The two civilians were taken under the wing of a representative of a Military Intelligence unit based on Gibraltar, who would care for them until the

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plane left next night. "We were not interested in who was in the aircraft," Lieutenant Lubienski later said. With normal Transport Command aircraft ferrying passengers to Britain from the Middle East, officers of the R.A.F. station's No. 27 A.D.R.U. (Air Despatch and Reception Unit) would board the aircraft, check off its passengers and cargo against the aircraft manifest – Form 1256 – and search the plane for contraband or unauthorised passengers; with V.I.P. planes, however, the procedures were not so rigorously applied.[8]

As the passengers disembarked from Liberator AL523 on the evening of July 3, Pilot Officer Briggs, the A.D.R.U. officer detailed to process this plane, could only stand impotent and irritated in the background and count them, one by one: ten passengers and six crew.[9] Whether this was right or not he could not tell, as the regulation copy of Form 1256 had – as usual on V.I.P. flights from Cairo West – not been forwarded to him.[10] Nor was he allowed to board this plane. None of its evidently considerable load of baggage was unloaded except for a dozen small travelling bags needed by the Governor's guests overnight, and five bags of diplomatic mail to be transferred to a regular B.O.A.C. plane, which stood less chance of being molested by German fighter aircraft on its way to England.

each transport Command squadron had its own maintenance unit at Gibraltar's North Front airfield.[11] No. 511 Squadron's maintenance unit was commanded by Sergeant Norman Moore, an expert in Liberators, who had been to California for the Liberator maintenance course run by the manufacturers. He and ten airmen of his unit had been waiting to service the Liberator as it arrived that Saturday afternoon. There were three corporals in his unit: Davis was the fitter, Hopgood was the electrician and Alexander was instruments. Sergeant Moore walked over to the aircraft's flight engineer and asked him if the aircraft was serviceable; both this N.C.O. and his Captain, Flight Lieutenant Prchal, told him that the Liberator was in perfect order.[12]

Moore called over his senior Corporal, William Davis, and ordered him to put a continuous guard on the aircraft immediately.[13]

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Whether this was normal for a maintenance sergeant cannot now be determined, but what happened next was certainly unusual: Moore instructed Davis that an airman would have to remain on the aircraft throughout the hours of darkness, keeping near the rear hatch.[14] Davis drew up a list of the airmen who were to guard the aircraft and told each man how long he was to be on guard and who would be relieving him. Then the three corporals withdrew to their billet and cut cards to decide who should perform the unusual – and for No. 511 Squadron at least, unique – vigil of sleeping in the Liberator. The lot fell to Corporal Francis Hopgood, and he resigned himself to having to bed down in the bomber as soon as darkness fell.[15]

as the staff cars drove through the broiling Saturday-afternoon streets of Gibraltar town, the Governor told Sikorski of the Foreign Office's howler, and of the measures he proposed to avoid an accidental confrontation between General Sikorski and Ambassador Maisky's party under his roof, after the Russians' arrival early next morning.

Macfarlane asked Sikorski to arrange for all his party to stay in their rooms until eleven A.M., by which time he would have the Russian party safely on their way again.[16] To speed the Russians' departure, he had arranged with his A.O.C., Air Commodore Simpson, to supply warning of worsening weather conditions at Cairo airport at an opportune moment soon after Maisky arrived in Gibraltar.

Sikorski took it all in good part. He in turn regaled the Governor with stories of his visit to the Middle East, and said how satisfied he was now that he had restored unity to the Polish forces there. He mentioned the letter he had received from Roosevelt while in Beirut, and explained that he was returning to London now "because he was urgently awaited by the [British] Prime Minister for very important political and military consultations."[17]

Upon arrival at the Governor's Palace, Sikorski was quite worn out. He and Lubienski had a brief talk with General Macfarlane over tea, then Sikorski excused himself and retired to his room to lie down.

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After a while, Lubienski was summoned upstairs to report on the progress of the evacuation of Polish soldiers from the Miranda del Ebro internment camp in Spain, and other matters on which the lieutenant was well-informed.[18]

Sikorski suggested to Lubienski that as his work seemed to be virtually complete, he should return to London with him to take fresh orders.

After reporting to his Commander-in-Chief, Lubienski conducted Sikorski's daughter and secretary, Kulakowski, round the town on a shopping expedition; then the whole party dined *en famille* with the Governor.[19] General Sikorski's dinner was taken upstairs to him. Soon afterwards most of the Polish party retired for the night.

Before retiring, General Sikorski's last action was to draft a telegram of good wishes to President Roosevelt to be despatched early on the following morning, America's national holiday. Mason-Macfarlane saw to it that it was transmitted to Washington during the early hours of July 4:

> I wish today, the July 4, to pay my sincere homage to the great American Nation, especially as I am spending it as a guest of the Governor of Gibraltar, where I have met some of your officers. I am convinced that under you, Mr President, the inspired leader of the American Nation, and in close collaboration with Great Britain, the victory will soon come to the United Nations. This victory will not only crush the enemy, but also bring into being your principles of freedom and justice.[20]

gibraltar went to sleep. From the Bay came occasional sounds of metal on metal as Royal Navy divers under their 23–year-old Diving Officer, Lieutenant William Bailey, continued their ceaseless inspection of the bottom of the many ships at anchor there, groping their way yard by yard along the underside of the ships, feeling for the limpet mines the enemy might have placed.[21] From his rooftop on Spanish territory, the German agent remained at his binoculars, scanning the harbour and the airfield for any signs of activity. Dur-

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ing the evening he reported to Berlin that a *Cairo*-class cruiser which had berthed at Gibraltar had put out to sea again, and headed into the Mediterranean followed by an *Aurora*-class cruiser, at 11.40 P.M.[22] Two hundred or more aircraft were parked around the airfield, but on one special apron, under the hard glare of floodlights, stood an R.A.F. Liberator, around which paced British soldiers with guns ready and bayonets fixed.[23]

Towards midnight, Lieutenant Lubienski drove down to the airfield with Sikorski's private secretary, Adam Kulakowski: the General had decided to confer Polish decorations on some of the Gibraltar officers on the following day, but he had left his case with the decorations and ribbons in the aircraft. The party had taken only the very minimum of luggage to Government House, leaving the rest in the Liberator. Lubienski found two sentries barring his way. He explained what was required, and they accompanied him and Kulakowski to the door in the fuselage, which was locked; one of the sentries banged on the door, and it was opened from within by an N.C.O. in R.A.F. uniform. Lubienski assumed that this guard was required by regulations to remain in a V.I.P. aircraft overnight. Clearly the station commander was taking no chances on the plane's being sabotaged. The briefcase was handed out to Kulakowski, and together they drove back to the Convent.[24]

at about seven o'clock on Sunday morning, July 4, Mr Maisky arrived, bustling and jovial, at Gibraltar airfield.[25] His aircraft was wheeled to a spot on the apron not far from Sikorski's Liberator and a maintenance party of airmen was detailed to service it.[26] The Russian party was brought up to the Convent, where the Governor placed at their disposal his own set of rooms in a distant wing of Government House; the Russians were left to refresh themselves. With a conspiratorial air, Mason-Macfarlane told Lubienski soon after that the Russians had arrived, and that he would be taking them down to the airfield at eleven A.M. "I'll show a white handkerchief as a signal that the coast is clear, and you can let your Prime Minister's party out of their rooms."[27]

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Sure enough, as the Russian ambassador and his party were breakfasting, a messenger arrived from Air Headquarters with the sad news that Mr Maisky would have to proceed for Algiers at eleven A.M. since unfavourable weather was forecast after then.

Major Anthony Quayle, the Governor's military assistant, who had served Maisky his breakfast, took him out on a quick sightseeing tour of Gibraltar, during which the Russian infuriated Quayle – now a well-known actor – by making a deprecatory and uninformed comparison of the English with the Soviet Theatre.[28]

Standing on top of the Rock at last, they turned and looked out over the airfield and no-man's-land to Spain, its low mountains fading into the distance.

Maisky said, "Major Quayle, what do you think will happen to Spain?"

The British officer replied that there was only one hope for the country – the Restoration of the Monarchy. Mr Maisky acidly replied, "I don't think Spain is the country and 1943 is the year to talk of the Restoration of Monarchies."

Quietly pleased at having goaded Maisky into this outburst, Quayle returned him to the Convent. There were no further untoward incidents before the Governor took leave of his Russian guests at the appointed time, eleven A.M.

"I saw him off with considerable relief at that hour, returning to the house to find Sikorski and the Poles rising from their beds in considerable amusement," Macfarlane recorded later.[29]

(ii)

General Sikorski had seldom been seen in a brighter mood than on this, his last day alive. He had slept well, he was among friends, and the day was warm and sunny.

During the night, a Polish courier had arrived at Gibraltar from Warsaw: he had had a long and arduous journey – it had taken him since the second week in February to make his way across occupied Europe and Spain – but at last he stood on British soil, with a satchel full of secret papers for the London authorities to study.[30] At eleven

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A.M. on this Sunday morning, he was brought up from the Polish escapees' quarters to Government House, where after an hour closeted with General Klimecki and Colonel Marecki, he found himself face to face with the Prime Minister of Poland and his Commander-in-Chief – the very last person he had expected to see in Gibraltar.[31] Sikorski satisfied himself of the urgency of the secret information that this courier, Bombardier Gralewski (code-name "Pankowski"), was bearing, and decided that he should have Lubienski's seat in the Liberator that night, and fly back to London with him.

Gralewski returned to his quarters, and in his diary he wrote these words: "I was afraid that the Old Man would reprimand me, because my walk from Warsaw has taken me so long. But he was very nice: he has ordered me to fly back with him. Today one chapter of my life is ending, and another one begins. I wonder what it brings?"[32]

After an hour, the Polish Prime Minister called in Lieutenant Lubienski, and dictated to his secretary a speech in French for the afternoon's decoration ceremony. A long conversation with Lubienski on his plans for the future of Poland followed. Lubienski, who had been personal secretary of Minister Beck before the war, was the ideal audience for these thoughts. As the lieutenant was leaving, Sikorski informed him that Gralewski would be taking his place on the plane. Lubienski called up the airfield's A.D.R.U., and the A.D.R.U. officer on duty telephoned the pilot. Prchal agreed to take the extra Pole, provided he had no heavy baggage.[33]

Now the hapless A.D.R.U. officer had to have the aircraft's manifest, as the extra passenger would have to be entered on it. Prchal produced his own copy of Form 1256 briefly from the plane's document case, and it was amended to include Gralewski's name. Pilot Officer Briggs glimpsed the figure for the payload, and believed it read 5,540 pounds – but this was within a Liberator's capabilities.[34]

In the meantime, Sikorski's political liaison officer Victor Cazalet went down and played several games of squash with Major Quayle, while other members of the party went sightseeing in the town.[35] At one P.M., General Sikorski inspected a guard of honour of Somerset Light Infantry drawn up with the Regimental Band in the garden of Government House, and then in the name of his President he in-

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vested General Mason-Macfarlane and the Admiral Commanding Gibraltar, Sir Frederick Edward-Collins, with a high traditional Polish decoration – the Order of Polonia Restituta.[36] His short French speech went off without a hitch, and ended with the words: "I give you this decoration in recognition of the great services you have both rendered to the common cause and the attainment of final and decisive victory, animated as you have always been by profound friendship for Poland and for Polish soldiers, sailors and airmen."[37]

Afterwards there was an official luncheon given by the Governor in the cool of Government House, attended by his three Service commanders, Sikorski and his party, and the local Colonial Secretary. Captain Borzemski and Lieutenant Rosycki, the commanding officer of the Polish company in Gibraltar, were also among the guests.

At a quarter to three, ninety-five Polish soldiers marched in perfect order into the garden of Government House, to be inspected and addressed by their Commander in Chief. Here there was the kind of unforeseen incident which every company commander must dread. Sikorski stopped in front of one of the Polish soldiers and asked him what it felt like to be wearing a Polish soldier's uniform again. The man's unbelieving lieutenant heard him retort that he didn't care for it as he was a sailor by profession and had not the least desire to be a soldier; and if he was allowed to go back to the sea, he didn't give a damn whose flag he sailed under. The reluctant soldier was removed from the parade and stripped of his uniform. Sikorski, determined to show his magnanimity, ordered that no disciplinary action be taken against him, despite his gross discourtesy.[38]

After a brief *siesta*, while General Sikorski's daughter and Colonel Marecki played a sweltering game of tennis, Sikorski and his naval A.D.C. spent the rest of the afternoon being shown round the tunnels and defences of the Fortress, together with the British War Minister Sir James Grigg, who had by now also arrived in his special plane, on his way home from the Middle East.[39]

They inspected all the tunnelling work that had been done inside the Rock since 1940. As Mason-Macfarlane said, if the enemy had attacked the "impregnable" Rock in June or July of 1940, they would have captured it even more rapidly than they subsequently took Sin-

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gapore and Hongkong: while modest beginnings had by then been made with coastal defences against seaborne attack, and with the Rock's anti-aircraft defences, no defence had been provided against attack from Spanish territory; the old galleries dated back to the late 18th century and the Fortress walls were over a hundred years old. The garrison in 1940 could not have held out long, and it was only under Lord Ironside's admirable rule that a number of A.R.P. shelters had been built, for which the funds had come not from London but from the Colony itself.

All that had changed by July 1943: few people knew the magnitude of the fortification work undertaken in the intervening three years, and by the time the Rock was called upon to play its first important role, during the North African landings of late 1942, the Fortress could have withstood siege for a considerable length of time. Canadian tunnelling companies had efficiently disembowelled the Rock of a million tons of stone, and in these tunnels now resided the garrison forces, its provisions and ammunition.[40]

Tired and footsore, the whole party descended from the Rock and drove to the United States mission's library, where the Fourth of July was celebrated in a two-hour sherry party in the garden.[41] It was now six P.M.: five hours to go. There were many local dignitaries at the function – it was the first that the Gibraltarians knew of the presence of the Polish Prime Minister in their midst. To members of the French mission, Sikorski said that he intended to go to Algeria in four weeks' time to continue political discussions he had already started with de Gaulle's Free French Committee.[42] After a while, Mason-Macfarlane drew the senior Polish officers aside and told them that he had laid on a small but convivial dinner party in the Convent before their departure.

Here the drinking was resumed. Four pipers of the Royal Scots played their way round the dining room in the customary fashion, and Sikorski affected to appreciate the gay strains of the bagpipes, even when they played a rendering of the Polish National Anthem.[43] He was almost teetotal and a non-smoker, but he was undaunted by

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such merry-making. He was in a splendid mood and nothing could darken his spirit at this hour.

He could converse but little in English, and to savour his wit and magnetic personality one's conversation had to be in French.[44] Macfarlane was fortunately a good linguist: he already spoke Russian and French, and he had started to learn Spanish as soon as he was posted to Gibraltar.[45] As the Governor looked at his guest now, he could see that the open and handsome features were lined with a weary sadness which never seemed to leave him, even at a happy hour like this. But his grey-blue eyes were strangely piercing, and he still spoke with great vitality.[46] Lieutenant Lubienski heard Sikorski confide briefly to his daughter, "I had a very strong feeling in Cairo that I would never see London again. But now we are among friends – what do these few hours of flying matter? We are flying back by night!"[47] And again he expressed his great satisfaction with the pilot who had flown them there, and was flying them on tonight, for he was an officer of the greatest experience and capabilities.[48]

Well though Sikorski had slept during the night and in his afternoon *siesta*, he was once again unmistakably tiring; the hot Gibraltar climate had sapped his strength to a degree that alarmed his daughter, who was, as we have seen, the custodian of his health. She greatly feared the effect that the all-night flight to England would have on him, and she privately asked a senior R.A.F. officer whether a bed could possibly be installed in the bomber for her father to sleep on.[49] The R.A.F. officer agreed, and almost at once Sergeant Moore's maintenance unit was detailed to secure an iron bedstead in the bomb bay; while his men set about this, at ten o'clock that night, as light was already beginning to fade, Moore himself carried out his routine and signed its travelling maintenance form to that effect.[50] His unit had already thoroughly serviced and checked the whole aircraft, and 2,000 gallons of aviation spirit had been pumped into its tanks, leaving them brimming full with no room for more.[51] An hour passed while the bedstead was installed and bolted down.

Flight Lieutenant Prchal had telephoned Government House and announced that he wanted to take off at eleven P.M. In groups and clusters, the eleven passengers were driven down to the airfield dur-

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ing the next half hour. Flight Lieutenant Perry, the Governor's A.D.C., drove his own close friend Colonel Victor Cazalet and Lieutenant Ponikiewski to the airfield in his jeep, making small talk all the way. Perry complimented Cazalet on the smart brown suede boots that he was wearing. The M.P. replied that he had purchased them in Cairo. After a moment he added that he was somewhat shocked by the careless attitude both of his fellow passengers and of the crew: "Do you know, I am the only one to strap myself in during take-off?"

Perry had gained the same impression of a general laxity: he had learned with half-amusement that most of the crew and several passengers had purchased large quantities of duty-free whisky and sherry at Gibraltar to take back to England, where such commodities were virtually unobtainable.[52]

The tanks of the Liberator had been topped up with the last gallons of high-octane fuel, and the crew climbed in. There was the usual pungent smell of 100–octane petrol: Liberators always smelt as though they had a fuel leak somewhere. The draughts would soon dispel these odours once the plane took off. The two mysterious British passengers, apparently Secret Service agents from Cairo, drove up and climbed aboard. Then, in several cars, General Sikorski's party arrived, accompanied by the Governor and all the Gibraltar command's senior officers.

Without malice towards the others, it must be said that the Liberator's crew and the R.A.F. station's officers were probably the only people unaffected by the evening's merrymaking.[53] Why indeed should the others not have been? They were off duty, it was somebody's National Holiday, and it was a Sunday night. "We all set out for the aerodrome in very good spirits," Macfarlane later wrote.[54]

Flight Lieutenant Prchal announced to Sikorski that the aircraft was ready, and the leave-taking began. General Mason-Macfarlane knew Prchal well, having been flown by him on two or three previous occasions. He afterwards described how he saw no outward signs of emotion in the pilot. "He was absolutely normal, and in fact the very best type of pre-war civilian airline pilot which we had always known him to be."[55] The flight lieutenant was dressed in normal

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R.A.F. flying gear. His face was alert, his cheeks were hollow – a typical young Allied officer in his early thirties.

He wore no "Mae West" life-jacket, but this surprised nobody who knew him. "The pilot, like nearly all pilots, had his idiosyncrasies," Mason-Macfarlane recorded later, "and he never under any circumstances wore his Mae West either taking off or landing. He had his Mae West hung over the back of his seat where it would be handy if required."[56] This was not against R.A.F. regulations. The relevant paragraph of these stipulated: "Life-saving waistcoats . . . will invariably be carried for every occupant of an aeroplane flying over an expanse of water . . . They will be kept immediately available but need not be worn unless so ordered by the first pilot."[57]

Left in the Liberator's cockpit, Prchal's co-pilot, Squadron Leader W. S. Herring, a Lincolnshire man known affectionately as "Kipper" Herring, switched on each engine in turn; they seemed to take a little longer than usual to fire, but soon all four were running smoothly, the propellers windmilling in a blur.[58] Sikorski acknowledged the pilot's urging to his party to climb aboard, said to the Gibraltar officers: "All right, I'll say good-bye." Looking singularly attractive in battledress and military cap, Sikorski's daughter climbed in through the rear hatch in the fuselage, following the other officers; in her hand she clutched the large box of chocolates given her by the Governor's staff. Major Quayle, who was standing near the aircraft with the R.A.F. station commander Group Captain Bolland, looked briefly into the aircraft and saw the passengers go forward.[59]

Lubienski stood at the foot of the short ladder as his Commander-in-Chief, General Sikorski, climbed aboard, last of all. In the doorway, Sikorski turned round, and said to him: "*Captain* Lubienski, we'll meet in London shortly." The door was closed behind him.

At the same time as the work on the construction of the main honeycomb of tunnels in the Rock had begun, the British authorities had set about lengthening the one and only runway of the tiny aerodrome built in the no-man's-land between the British colony and the Spanish frontier. Millions of tons of rubble, quarried from the tunnels and North Front of the Rock, had been tipped into Gibraltar Bay, to carry a 150–yard-wide runway extension about 900

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yards out into the bay.[60] Flight Lieutenant Prchal's heavy Liberator now taxied slowly along the runway until it reached almost the very end of this western extension, and turned round, to face along the runway towards the Mediterranean Sea. The roar of the engines was subdued again.

All the lights on the airfield went out, leaving only the dim flarepath lamps lining the 1,800–yard long runway, the string of dim red lamps at its end, and then the blackness of the sea. In their darkened cockpit, pilot and co-pilot were probably running through the obligatory tests of all the controls.

Co-pilot: "Flight controls?"

The pilot checks that he can move the control column forward to its full extent, while giving Right on his wheel and Right on his rudder; then he moves the column fully back, and gives Left on the wheel and Left on the rudder. Pilot duly reports: "Controls checked for full travel and free movement!" The co-pilot asks: "Doors and hatches?" All the doors and hatches are closed. Back comes the answer: "Doors and hatches closed!"[61]

All four engines were again run up individually, to the full 1,000 r.p.m. for warming up. Many minutes passed. The cluster of people gathered to see the party off had already begun to break up. Another minute or two ticked away while final signals were passed between cockpit and control tower.

General Mason-Macfarlane and several of his party had wandered down to the edge of the runway, where they could wave to the Liberator as it passed them. Twenty minutes had passed, and still its engines were being run up. The air was now decidedly chilly, and their laughter had died away.

A mighty roar of engines at the far end of the runway bellowed out, and they could see the red and green navigation lamps of the aircraft begin to move towards them. Gathering speed, the twenty-five ton aircraft lumbered past them, a tornado of dust tumbling round the watching officers. Everybody on the airfield was watching, for there was always something of a fireworks display about a Liberator's take-off – bangs and flashes and showers of sparks. Then

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the aircraft was airborne at last, lifting into the air with still at least 500 yards to go before it reached the runway's end.

Somewhat irreverently, Mason-Macfarlane thought to himself, "Well, there's another valuable cargo safely on its way."[62]

He was just about to turn away, when he saw that the dwindling navigation lights of the Liberator had stopped climbing – in fact they had slowly begun to sink. The Governor was not even momentarily alarmed, however. He turned to Air Commodore Simpson – one of what he termed the Rock's "three wicked Uncles" – and commented: "Anybody can tell that that's Prchal flying that aircraft." Simpson agreed: the Czech had perfected his own private take-off technique for Liberators. This involved climbing rapidly at first, and then going into a shallow dive to pick up speed before making the final climb to cruising height. Everybody could still hear the engines running perfectly, as they watched the dwindling specks of light. But to their mounting puzzlement they saw them continue to sink, at a gliding angle of about ten degrees, then disappear altogether below the runway's level, which was about eight feet above the sea. At the same instant the mighty roar of aircraft engines cut out, leaving only a wall of silent darkness. For a moment nobody moved, then Bolland shouted: "Jesus! It's gone in the drink!"[63]

With a wail, the Polish officers began running along the runway, hoping frantically that the Liberator had landed at its very end, and was even now waiting there with its engines switched off. People were running in all directions. More Polish officers and airmen came tumbling out of the Transit Huts bordering the airfield. Headlamps blazing, staff cars overtook them as they ran along the runway, and they climbed onto their running boards. At the end of the runway, there was nothing – only the sea. Several airmen launched the little dinghy that the station commander had provided on a slipway for just such an emergency as this, and they valiantly began pulling out to sea.

Every searchlight on the eastern side of the Rock came on, playing over the airfield and sea, trying to make out the wreckage of the aircraft. The Air/Sea Rescue launches had had to be moored in Gibraltar Bay, on the other side of the Rock, as the eastern side was too

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exposed for such small craft: it would take eight or ten minutes before they could arrive.

Then a gasp went up. One groping searchlight had fastened onto a great black object clinging to the surface of the sea about 700 yards from the runway's end; one wing was lifting slightly into the air, like a great dying albatross. The Governor and Count Lubienski began wading out into the sea after the dinghy, but were soon forced back by the waves. Other searchlights had by now also swung round and fastened onto the wreck, but even as they did so the greater part disappeared from sight. A Polish airman standing near Major Quayle began sobbing quietly, and kept repeating: "This is the end of Poland. This is the end of Poland."[64]

General Sikorski's aircraft had crashed into the sea, and there was nothing they could do but wait until the first high-speed launches arrived.

(iii)

General Mason-Macfarlane drove back to the airfield's control tower, numbed by a growing sense of shock. "I have seldom felt so helpless," he was to write. A small aircraft whirred over them, heading for the now brilliantly illuminated patch of sea where the wreckage had last been seen; it began dropping flares over the area.

At the control tower, the Governor learned that just before the sound of the aircraft's engines had cut, their radio had picked up a cry from the Liberator's pilot, shouting: "*Crash landing!*" The tower was in contact with the R.N.V.R. skipper of the naval launch always on patrol around the Rock, and with the two high-speed launches that had now left their moorings on the western side. Even as Mason-Macfarlane and his party arrived, the first message came in from one of them: they had reached the crash site, but there was nothing but débris left afloat. They had picked up the pilot, who was alive, and three bodies, of which latter one was still just breathing. "Who is breathing?" asked the Governor, taking the microphone. The skipper of the launch replied that it was difficult to identify them, as they hadn't many clothes on. Mason-Macfarlane ordered one launch

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to return with the bodies and the two survivors to the harbour at once.[65]

Lieutenant Lubienski begged the Governor to let him go out to the disaster scene, haunted by the fear that his Commander-in-Chief might be drowning somewhere out there. Macfarlane said this was impossible: it would be better to go down to the Water-port to await the launch's return.

He, Major Quayle and the Polish officer reached the dockside as the first launch was making fast, its engines still gently throbbing. Three bodies lay covered by blankets on the deck – the one who had still been breathing had died almost as soon as he had been picked up. General Mason-Macfarlane could not bring himself to look at them, and he asked Lubienski to see who they were.[66]

The pilot, Edward Prchal, was evidently the sole survivor. He had been found floating in the sea close to the disaster area, apparently conscious but unable to speak. R.A.F. officers prepared to remove him to hospital at once.

Lubienski was aboard the launch now, and he lifted up the blanket covering the three corpses: of General Sikorski, who had obviously been killed instantly by a terrible head wound; of General Klimecki, his Chief of Staff, who seemed at first sight hardly injured at all; and of Brigadier John Whiteley, M.P., who had expired soon after the launch had picked him up.[67]

But it was not only this tragic sight which was now disturbing the Governor of Gibraltar. The professional mind of this former Intelligence chief was exercised by something about the pilot who had been carried away in a state of shock on an Air Force stretcher. "There was one very extraordinary fact," he wrote, "that when he was picked up out of the water he was found to be not only wearing his Mae West, but every tape and fastening had been properly put on and done up."[68]

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4: Search and Inquire

The first mystery has become apparent; but it is necessary to go back twenty minutes in time to the moment when the rescue operations began. Three high-speed launches had been moored at the Flying Boat Station on the western side of the Rock – launches of the Royal Air Force's No. 71 Air/Sea Rescue Unit, commanded by Flight Lieutenant Albert Posgate. Two of these launches were always kept at instant readiness, the third being held in reserve. As the harbour boom was closed at night, the launches were taken out and moored outside this from ten P.M. until eight A.M. Of the two, the duty launch that night was the slower one – it would take a full nine minutes to reach the eastern end of the runway where the Liberator had crashed.[1]

As soon as the crash occurred, North Front's Flying Control Officer telephoned Area Combined Headquarters, who controlled the launches' movements; within thirty seconds of receiving the order to move, at 11.10 P.M. – three minutes after the crash – this launch was under way, and radio contact with Flying Control had been established.[2] At 11.20 P.M., the faster of the two launches, commanded by Posgate himself, had also been ordered to put out, and he reached the scene six minutes later.

By 11.15 P.M., the R.A.F. station's little rowing dinghy had already reached the site of the crash, manned by seven airmen. The sea was

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covered with debris, and still quite dark. They had heard someone shouting, and rowed towards him. They found it was the Liberator's pilot, floundering about in the sea and wearing a fully inflated Mae West but no parachute harness; he was quite conscious but unable to speak. The airmen lifted him into the dinghy, and sat him in the stern while they rowed round looking for more survivors. A few minutes later, they picked up the body of a British officer, floating in the sea with his head under water; they considered he was dead. Lights were coming on all over the Rock, and the whole area of the crash was bathed in a fierce white light. The airmen could see that the sea was strewn with mail, several inches deep. The pilot began mumbling to himself in a language the airmen could not understand.[3]

By now the dinghy was itself in a precarious position; with the two extra people on board, it was very low in the water and beginning to flood. The airmen were relieved to hear the heavier naval craft arrive. The first was a small Royal Navy launch. They had no medical facilities on board. But they stated that an R.A.F. rescue launch was on its way round the Rock. The two people they had picked up were transferred to the R.A.F. launch as soon as it arrived. The second man they had picked up – Brigadier Whiteley – died soon after. The dinghy, which had by now drifted with the debris about half a mile southwards down the coast, turned back to shore, while the heavier launches continued with the rescue and salvage efforts. No more survivors were found.

All these rescue efforts nearly came to a disastrous end, for very soon after the launches reached the spot, they found that there was a considerable quantity of high-octane petrol on the surface of the sea. To make matters worse, Flight Lieutenant Posgate learned by radio that light aircraft would "co-operate" and drop flares over the scene. He urgently radioed back that flares were not wanted, since there was quite enough illumination already. Nonetheless the aircraft made a number of passes during the next twenty minutes, releasing several flares, all of which mercifully burnt out before they reached the petrol-sodden sea.[4]

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Both Air/Sea Rescue launches continued their search for survivors until 4.20 A.M. on July 5. They picked up no fewer than thirty mailbags and recovered a quantity of diplomatic papers and money. By the time they returned to the harbour they had picked up altogether one survivor (the pilot) and four bodies, three of which were fully clothed. The four watches taken off these bodies had all stopped between six and seven minutes past eleven P.M. on the previous night.

mason-macfarlane always used to say that Gibraltar was not unlike Clapham Junction: sooner or later everybody of importance passed through it.[5] On the afternoon of July 4, the British War Minister, Sir James Grigg, had arrived there; when Macfarlane returned to his Palace shortly after midnight of the 5th, Grigg was waiting for him, anxious for further detail of what he had so far learned only by rumour.[6] The Governor told him that Sikorski was dead, and apparently all the others too. Grigg said that London would have to be informed, and the Governor set wheels in motion at once. A formal signal had already gone from the Transit Squadron's C.O. to Transport Command in England, advising them that Liberator AL523 would not now be arriving as it had crashed on take-off.[7] Now the Governor asked Lieutenant Lubienski to inform the Polish government, while he cabled the news to the Colonial Office himself.[8]

"I could not get enough grip on myself to send a report to London," said Lubienski afterwards. "What could I write? What was I to tell Sikorski's widow? What could I tell the Polish President?" Major Quayle and the Governor's P.A., Captain David Woodford, were both magnificent, and together they drafted the text of a despatch to London.[9] Macfarlane cabled the Polish President, and followed it with a lengthy letter describing in general terms the evening's events leading up to the tragedy. King George VI also sent a telegram expressing his deep shock. All emphasised that the accident was a great blow to the Allied cause.[10]

In London, the Air Ministry issued a communiqué announcing the death of General Sikorski and stating that the only survivor of the accident was the pilot, who was "seriously injured" and was in hospital.[11] An incomplete list of the passengers was issued shortly

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after.[12] By noon, the news was being flashed all round the world. A cable was sent to Roosevelt, Cordell Hull and Sumner Welles by the U.S. Ambassador to the Polish Government: "British Air Ministry informs me General Sikorski, his daughter Madame Lesniowska and his Chief of Staff General Klimecki met their death by plane accident at Gibraltar yesterday."[13] For Sumner Welles especially this news prompted a sinister train of thought, taking into account certain other details of which he was aware.[14]

By this time, Ambassador Maisky had also learned of Sikorski's death at Gibraltar from the British Ambassador in Cairo. The inscrutable Russian commented simply, "That really is most interesting." And he added, "It explains why Macfarlane was in such a frightful hurry to get me off the Rock." So the charade with the bad weather forecast had not deceived him at all.[15]

the salvage of the debris began as dawn broke. As it grew light, R.A.F. officers saw a sorry mass of flotsam drifting only about twenty-five yards off shore. The airfield's administrative officer, Squadron Leader Horton, went out in a rowing boat with an N.C.O., and together they made the most inexplicable haul – British £1 notes, some loosely bundled and wrapped with elastic bands, others floating free and sodden on the mirror-like surface of the sea, totalling between £500 and £700 worth. Among the other property they hauled aboard was a brown fur coat, which had been floating, fortunately fur uppermost, on the surface; this coat they presumed to have been Madame Lesniowska's, since she was the only woman on the plane. Horton took his boatload ashore, and drove it to Government House, where it was handed over to Major Quayle.

At a quarter to eleven the King's Harbour Master[16] was ordered to render all possible assistance in the salvage of the wreckage, bodies and debris from the seabed where the plane had crashed.[17] For various reasons connected with the Allied build-up for the imminent invasion of Sicily, the heavy diving and lifting gear was not readily available, and during July 5 most of the diving operations were undertaken by local divers. It was not until 5.20 P.M. that evening that the Royal Navy's moorings vessel *Moorhill* left her anchorage

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and sailed slowly round the Rock to where the wreckage lay, some 700 yards off the eastern end of the runway. The underwater wreckage had been sighted from the air by Swordfish aircraft: it was clearly visible, with its apparently unretracted landing wheels uppermost, and fuselage broken into many sections. Quantities of petrol were still polluting the sea.[18]

The divers had already begun diving round the wreckage, and they prepared it for slinging and hoisting out of the sea. They reported that the fuselage had been badly crushed in places; the tail unit had broken off completely, and lay between the wingspan and the runway's end. The main wingspan was intact and complete with all four engines. The propellers and the reduction-gear housings had come off all of them. The wingspan was still attached to a large section of fuselage, but this was badly damaged forward of the navigator's position.[19] As the *Moorhill* lifted the wingspan off the seabed, divers recovered the body of one crew member who had been trapped beneath it. All attempts to hoist the huge (110–foot) wingspan onto the vessel failed, however. At the R.A.F.'s request the whole section was towed closer inshore and dropped onto the seabed, at about 9.30 P.M. This would facilitate a more thorough search of the seabed, where the aircraft wreckage had lain, on the following day.

The bodies so far recovered had been taken to the local mortuary, where the R.A.F. station's medical officer examined them as much as he was allowed by the Governor. For political reasons, no post-mortem examination was permitted.[20] Squadron Leader Canning, the chief medical officer, determined that all of the victims had multiple injuries to the head and elsewhere. He recorded that the degree of violence suggested that their times of deaths "approximated to the time of the accident." General Sikorski had a deep gash in the pre-frontal region of his head, and other witnesses saw that a neat hole had been drilled by some sharp object in the corner of one eye, although the eye itself was quite undamaged.[21] Canning gave the General minor cosmetic treatment, so that he could be photographed by R.A.F. photographers, and signed Sikorski's death certificate soon after.

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From an examination of the few bodies brought in, some details of what must have happened in the aircraft could be pieced together. The Liberator had contained a V.I.P. cabin and this had apparently been allocated to Sikorski, Klimecki, Brigadier Whiteley and Sikorski's daughter. The party had evidently begun to turn in for the night some minutes before the aircraft took off.[22] Sikorski was clad in a pyjama top and the familiar khaki uniform trousers with a broad black stripe; he had just taken one boot off when the aircraft crashed.[23] As Lieutenant Lubienski had examined him lying on the quayside many hours before, he had still had his daughter's uniform jacket tangled round his legs. General Klimecki had suffered multiple injuries and was just a "bag of bones" in his battledress.[24]

There were no coffins available in Gibraltar, as all bodies were normally disposed of by burial at sea or cremation there. Major Quayle moved heaven and earth, and by the evening of July 5 he had secured six coffins from Spain,[25] enough for the victims already lying in the mortuary, and he had ordered enough for all the passengers known to have been on the plane.[26] (This was to prove provident two days later.) Together Lubienski, Quayle and Lieutenant Rosycki, the local Polish company's commanding officer, laid the bodies of Sikorski and Klimecki into their coffins, wrapped in the same naval blankets in which they had been brought ashore. Then the thin zinc lining of the coffins was sealed, and the simple pine boxes were nailed shut.[27]

The Governor, very mindful of the terrific heat of Gibraltar in July, had strongly recommended that all the coffins be flown back to England at once; but it was not to be, for the Polish Minister of Information in London, Professor Kot, arranged for a Polish destroyer to be sent out to Gibraltar for them, and that would take several days.[28] The authorities in England had prepared to cremate the bodies, but the Poles objected, pointing out that this was forbidden for Catholics.

at the same time, the Polish Cabinet met to "consider the situation" caused by General Sikorski's death. Whose name should they put forward to President Rackiewicz as Sikorski's successor? It would

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not be an easy choice. None of the other leaders had won Mr Churchill's affection to such an extent; none could hope to unite the warring factions within the Polish exiles' ranks as Sikorski had. One foreign journalist cabled his newspaper to report: "The first impression one gets in London is that the dismay and sorrow are genuine."[29]

That evening, as the salvage operations paused and darkness fell once more, the streets of Gibraltar cooled. The two coffins containing General Sikorski and General Klimecki were borne in solemn procession from the mortuary to the Roman Catholic Cathedral of St. Mary the Crowned, passing through streets lined with British and Polish troops. Lieutenant Lubienski, dressed in black morning suit, was chief mourner. General Mason-Macfarlane, his mind still reeling at the ghastly tragedy that had struck down such a close friend, in his colony, stumbled along behind the coffins, aided by his Service commanders. The cathedral's forecourt echoed to the sad strains of Chopin's Funeral March.[30] Later that night, the Governor returned privately to the cathedral to lay wreaths of red and white flowers on the two coffins: they lay in state, now guarded by Polish officers and men of the same company that Sikorski had inspected only one day before.[31]

As Macfarlane returned to his Palace, the German radio was broadcasting throughout occupied Europe the first shrill allegations that Sikorski had been murdered by the "British Secret Service," since he had become too troublesome for the Allies. The Germans further claimed that during the course of the day information had reached the German Foreign Office, "in particular from Lisbon and Madrid," which left no doubt but that the British "Secret Service" had caused Sikorski's death. Dr Paul Schmidt, the German Foreign Office spokesman, reported that "Sikorski's death had provided the only way out of this dilemma." The death of Sikorski was coupled with the assassination of Admiral Jean-François Darlan six months before in North Africa; Darlan, the Germans hastened to point out, had also had policies which ran counter to the British plans.[32] Both the British and the Polish Governments dismissed this absurd German pronouncement (which had been made barely two hours after

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the news of Sikorski's death had reached Berlin) as "typifying the low mentality" of the enemy[33]; and it is clear that there is no indication whatsoever in the surviving files of the German Foreign Office, the S.S., or the *Abwehr*, that the announcement was anything but unfounded mischief making.[34] It would obviously take weeks of inquiry before it could be established whether the plane crash had been an accident or not.

(ii)

Off the eastern side of the Gibraltar isthmus, the current runs slowly southward for eight hours of each day, beginning about three and a half hours after high water; the rest of the time there is a slow drift northwards, or hardly any current at all. Round Gibraltar, the daily rise and fall of the tide is little more than two feet, and close inshore the current is virtually non-existent.[35] Twenty-five feet below the surface of this still, almost tideless sea, unruffled by any breeze, lay scattered the fragmented wreckage of Liberator AL523, seven hundred yards from the runway's eastern end. The main wingspan had now been dragged clear, leaving the original crash location clear for search.

There was some suggestion that the local divers who had worked for the first day around the wreckage had done so rather clumsily, and during the night of the July 5, the Governor requested the Royal Navy to take over all the diving and salvage work.[36] Commander Ralph Hancock, the officer commanding Gibraltar's minesweeping and extended defences, was approached in this connection, and he in turn contacted Lieutenant William Bailey, his Diving Officer, and asked him to get a party of divers together.[37] Bailey ran the Underwater Working Party, which normally searched the bottoms of ships in the harbour for limpet mines. He and his later sensational 30–year-old assistant, Lieutenant Crabb, usually took it in turns to mount a night watch against Italian "human torpedoes," and this particular night Bailey was ashore, while Crabb was working over the ships in Gibraltar Bay. Bailey was contacted by telephone and told that there was an emergency – a plane had crashed on take-off

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and diving was to begin at dawn. Obviously they could not dive during the hours of darkness.[38]

At about 5.30 A.M., while it was still dark, Lieutenant Bailey and four or five of his diving party climbed into one of the Air/Sea Rescue launches and went round to the disaster site. By the time dawn broke they were ready to begin diving: they had donned their woollens, overalls and Davis escape apparatus they used as improvised diving gear. The tender anchored over the main crash site, and the divers flopped down into the sea. It was fortunate that the crash had occurred in such comparatively shallow water, for his party could not dive deeper than about thirty feet in their Davis apparatus. Unlike proper diving gear, this apparatus was designed to be buoyant, and Bailey and his men could only operate on the seabed by anchoring one foot under something, or by carrying heavy ballast.

As Bailey's eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he could see the first parts of the aircraft – the reduction-gear housing off one engine being the largest thing visible. The sun rose, and within an hour it was so light that he and his men could see for twenty feet in either direction, through the clear sea water. Following the general density of the debris pattern, he worked his way towards its centre: there was little recognisable left of the Liberator now. The fuselage had disintegrated into several pieces, badly crushed; the aircraft's innards had gushed out, and lay strewn over a radius of 150 or 200 yards. The seabed was a hard and level sand, and there was no difficulty in spotting even the smallest article. Bailey saw a pair of nail scissors lying several feet away. As he and Crabb moved amongst the wreckage, they caught sight of something tangled up amongst it – apparently a headless man. Bailey decided it was time to surface to change their oxygen bottles and have a pause.[39]

On the surface, Bailey saw a launch flying the Governor's flag come out to meet them, and in it he recognised the stooping figure of Mason-Macfarlane – "H.E." as everybody called him in Gibraltar. Macfarlane asked who was in charge of the diving, and what they were looking for. Bailey replied that he was planning to concentrate on bringing up the bodies. The Governor told him to carry on, but

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that one vital thing he would like Bailey's men to look for was any kind of portfolio or briefcase.

Bailey found a black leather pouch on one of his next dives, and this was sent up. It appears to have been the vital portfolio that the Governor was looking for, because he was not asked to search again. The "headless man" they had spotted earlier turned out to be a raincoat dangling from the wreckage. Half an hour later, he was forced to surface again to change his oxygen. As he broke surface he found that another Air/Sea Rescue launch had closed their diving tender, an officer in R.A.F. uniform standing on its deck.

"Who's in charge of this party?" the R.A.F. officer asked. "What are you doing?"

Slightly annoyed by the officer's manner, a perhaps natural reaction to the gruesome scenes he was witnessing below, Bailey replied with a question: "Who are you, and what are you here for?"

The officer replied that he was from the Air Ministry's Accident Investigation Board. He had flown out from London, and had just arrived. He said to Bailey, "Do you think you divers can get up the controls for me without moving the levers?" Bailey replied that he had three men down below, but that he had orders to get the bodies up first and portfolios and other valuables that might be lying about the bottom. The R.A.F. officer ordered him to remove the controls. He described exactly where they would be found – the pedestal between the pilot's and co-pilot's positions. Bailey allocated one of the divers to go and hack out the piece of equipment with a razor-sharp axe, without moving the levers. This considerable feat was accomplished during the course of the day.

By this time a diving bell had also been procured from the dockyard, but it was of little use. The grim work of searching for the bodies continued throughout July 6. As Lieutenant Bailey worked his way round one piece of wreckage, he had the unpleasant feeling that somebody was watching him. He saw a movement out of the corner of his eye, and when he looked round he saw a body sitting strapped into a tubular steel chair, many feet from the wreckage, in full parachute harness and with an inflated lifejacket around its neck. One eye in the horribly mutilated face appeared to be looking straight

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at him. This was Colonel Victor Cazalet, Sikorski's political liaison officer; his head was lolling to one side, and his floating hair was waving in the gentle eddy of the sea. (Lubienski later said that Cazalet always was the nervous type, and always wore both parachute harness and Mae West when flying with Sikorski: not that either had availed him this time.) Bailey fastened a line to the chair, and body and chair were hoisted up into the tender.[40] He found the body of Lieutenant Ponikiewski, Sikorski's A.D.C., wearing blue naval battledress, soon after. Other divers found the body of one of the airmen – either the navigator or the flight engineer – and he was also sent aloft, and hauled into the launch in a net.

Soon after, Flight Lieutenant Perry was asked to go down to the mortuary to identify Cazalet: he had known him for seventeen years, but found identification almost impossible, so badly disfigured was the body. Then his eye lighted on the corpse's one remaining foot: it was clad in a brown suede boot. "It's Cazalet," he confirmed. He formally identified Ponikiewski as well.[41]

far away from Gibraltar, Mr Churchill was making his obituary speech on Sikorski to the House of Commons. He reiterated that Sikorski's death was one of the heaviest strokes the cause of the United Nations had sustained – he had been the symbol and embodiment of the spirit which had borne Poland through centuries of sorrow, a spirit which was "unquenchable by agony." In magnificent Churchillian phrases he rehearsed the history of how Sikorski had toiled to build up anew the Polish Army after the fall of France, and recalled his political wisdom in reaching agreement with Marshal Stalin in 1941. A Member of Parliament asked, "Could the Prime Minister give any indication to the House as to the cause of the accident?" This question was ruled out of order by the Speaker, as it was not the time for any discussion of the accident, and Churchill made no answer.[42]

As an interim measure, 43–year-old Stanislav Mikolajczyk (pronounced "mikko-eye-chik") was appointed acting Prime Minister by the Polish government in London; General Marian Kukiel was designated to be Deputy Commander-in-Chief until a successor to

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Sikorski was appointed. Mikolajczyk, a level-headed administrator who had been leader of the Polish Peasants' Party, was known as a moderate liberal whose career had shown honesty and balance; but he lacked the persuasive influence of a Sikorski. Now Sikorski was dead, and his widow, living alone in West London, was left with a letter of sympathy from Mr Winston Churchill to console her.[43]

(iii)

Off Gibraltar's eastern beach, the naval vessel *Moorhill* again lifted the Liberator's main wingspan out of the sea that afternoon, July 6, for the R.A.F. to photograph. A number of high-ranking R.A.F. officers had by now flown in from England, to mount the official Court of Inquiry into the crash, and some of these officers, who included the Polish Air Force Major Stanislaw Dudzinski as an invited observer, witnessed the salvage operations from a small launch.[44]

Among the watching officers was Wing Commander Arthur Stevens, the R.A.F. station's Chief Technical Officer. Scrutinising the dripping wingspan carefully, he established that the wingflaps were comparatively undamaged and about three-eighths of the way down; this was about the correct flap position for take-off, so there seemed nothing out of order there. He could see that the starboard wing and aileron were quite intact, but the port wing and its aileron were damaged, particularly the aileron. That evening, the 110–foot wingspan was again lowered to the seabed, somewhat less carefully than on the previous night, for this time it turned over as it was dropped and landed on the seabed with its wheels underneath. When *Moorhill* returned at nine A.M. on the following morning, July 7, the divers discovered that the crumpled fuselage had now broken right away from the wingspan. The latter was hoisted by slinging from the engines, and after it had been further inspected by the R.A.F. and Polish officers it was taken inshore and beached again in about twelve feet of water.[45]

Several bodies were still officially missing, including that of General Sikorski's daughter, Madame Lesniowska. In the naval dockyard, there was by now a most disquieting but entirely credible

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rumour to the effect that on the first day after the crash, the local divers had in fact found Madame Lesniowska's drowned body in the wreckage, but because of a powerful superstition among divers that it is extremely unlucky to allow the hair of a drowned woman to brush against you, they had left this well alone.[46] Mason-Macfarlane was certainly obsessed with the need for recovering Madame Lesniowska's body, as he showed by his orders to the divers and to all the local military authorities to keep a sharp look-out for bodies and debris which might be washed ashore, especially on the more inaccessible beaches and caves of the Rock.[47] Some suitcases of the daughter's clothes were found, but that was all.[48] Macfarlane asked the Spanish Civil Governor across the frontier to keep a watch out for the bodies, and the Spaniards promised to oblige; they retrieved the sash of one of Sikorski's British decorations, and his square-cornered cap, and these were handed over to Gibraltar.

The Polish Government in London despatched four high-ranking officials to represent them in the solemn funeral ceremonies in Gibraltar; they arrived early on July 7.[49] Of the four – Dr Jozef Retinger, who had been one of Sikorski's senior political advisers, Air Marshal Ujejski, head of the Polish Air Force, Colonel Protasewicz and Mr Tadeusz Ullmann – the latter is for us most interesting. With the arrival of this small, shy engineer from the Polish Ministry of the Interior, Lubienski's official role in the Polish inquiries into the crash was finished.[50] Mr Mikolajczyk had presumed that Ullmann would be permitted to take part in the official inquiry to be held by the R.A.F., but on arrival in Gibraltar he found that a Polish Air Force officer had been appointed with the approval of the Polish Air Force Inspectorate General, and Ullmann could not attend.[51]

Ullmann restricted himself to endeavouring – with the Air Marshal – to encourage Major Dudzinski to give greater voice to his suspicions when the Inquiry opened; he might only be a major, and a guest in a foreign country, but it was only through him that Poland could play a part in finding out the truth about how General Sikorski had died. Unfortunately, these exhortations seem to have had little effect on Dudzinski, who was, it must be said, in a most invidious position; he played little part in the subsequent proceed-

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ings of the Inquiry, and many puzzling questions were to remain unanswered in consequence.

meanwhile, what of the pilot? Flight Lieutenant Prchal lay in hospital, and nobody was allowed near him. The Air Ministry had announced on July 5, "the only survivor of the accident is the pilot, who was seriously injured and is now in hospital."[52] Newspapers throughout the world had taken up this point, the Allied ones in sympathy, the Axis ones suspiciously.[53] In the United States at least one newspaper published the pilot's name and precise details of his flying career on July 5. *New York Times* printed a cable from its London correspondent reporting "Only the Czech pilot survived, but he was seriously injured."[54] The pilot's nationality and name were withheld from the British Press.[55] The *Gibraltar Chronicle* reported, "There are hopes that he will recover."[56] It would indeed have been strange had he not recovered, for the R.A.F. station's Senior Medical Officer, Squadron Leader Daniel Canning, had examined him immediately upon his arrival ashore and according to his report diagnosed that Prchal was suffering from shock, lacerations of the face and a fracture of his right ankle. Dr Canning has lately amplified these words in an interview with the author, in which he said that Prchal was in a state of severe shock, and that his condition could be described as "reasonably serious."[57]

Prchal's lone survival of the Liberator crash provided German propaganda with some juicy morsels. William Joyce broadcast on the very night after the crash: "Oddly enough, of all those who were in the plane, it was only the pilot who escaped. Perhaps he had a certain premonition of evil, and I am wondering whether his name will figure in some Honours List of the future . . . ?"[58]

At the same time on the following night, Joyce predicted that Prchal's injuries would be "advanced as an excuse for his inability to give any detailed information for some time as to the cause of the crash."[59] German Home Service listeners were informed that Sikorski's friends in London were endeavouring to obtain permission for an investigation of the causes of the crash; but that even if these Poles were allowed to travel to Gibraltar, they would find re-

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strictions against which they were powerless to act.[60] Finally, at the Wilhelmstrasse press conference in Berlin on July 7, Dr Schmidt drew attention to the "interesting fact" that certain British newspapers were "making careful attempts to throw the responsibility for Sikorski's death on the Bolsheviks."[61]

All this still left Prchal the centre of speculation in the military hospital at Gibraltar. By July 7, he had been examined by the Chief Surgeon, Lieutenant-Colonel Simmons, and he had begun to answer questions put to him by the medical personnel.[62] Despite this the Polish officers who tried to gain access to him were told that he was unconscious for three days after the crash, and their attempts to see him were rebuffed with the explanation that Prchal suffered convulsions every time the subject of the crash was brought up.[63] The Diving Officer, Lieutenant Bailey, also went up to the hospital to see the pilot; he was told that Prchal was in a severe state of shock, and came away without seeing him.[64] The atmosphere of silence was oppressive, and in a crowded community like the Gibraltar colony, rumours spread like wildfire through the Allied officers' messes. While the newspapers continued to stress the crash pilot's vast experience in flying transport planes along this line from England to the Middle East, and pointed out that he had flown many other personalities, "including de Gaulle," without incident,[65] some Poles became more and more convinced that the pilot had somehow staged the accident and got away with it.

That they knew the pilot to be a Czech added weight to their suspicions. How often the dangers of flying with foreigners had been pointed out to General Sikorski! His own Chief of Air Staff, Air Vice-Marshal Ujejski, had once begged him to fly only with Polish aircrew; but Sikorski's reply had always been the same – he could not show the British that he did not trust them.[66] He had left his life in their hands, and on this trip it was he who had chosen Prchal. As the American newspapers now reported, "The Polish Premier had the choice of more than one plane for his return to London. He chose the one in which he was killed, because he knew the pilot."[67]

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Those who had had the chance of speaking privately with the pilot now had questions of their own. The senior medical officers of Gibraltar heard him describe how at the moment of impact, he had been thrown through the Perspex canopy of his cockpit and remembered no more. Squadron Leader Canning still recalls the disbelief with which this claim was met by him and his colleagues: "He could not possibly have shot through the Perspex without damaging himself appreciably more than he had."[68] So how *had* Prchal escaped comparatively uninjured from an aircraft crash in which all his passengers and crew had been killed? Group Captain Bolland, the lanky R.A.F. Station Commander at North Front, managed to see Edward Prchal in hospital, and was asked by the pilot whether his personal luggage had been recovered. In particular Prchal inquired "had the furs been salvaged."[69] These furs were presumably the contents of one or more of the three suitcases which Prchal informed this author that he had been carrying on the plane on behalf of a senior officer in the Middle East.

(iv)

Whenever an aircraft accident occurs in which one of its occupants is killed, under the Air Force Act an R.A.F. Court of Inquiry must be held to determine the accident's cause, and where there is evidence of human culpability to apportion the blame.[70] If superficially the Court of Inquiry had some elements of magistrate's court, coroner's inquest and court-martial, in fact it was none of these. It inquired into the circumstances of the accident, but it could only make recommendations as to disciplinary action.[71] On the other hand, to facilitate the investigation, the Court's President was empowered to accept any relevant evidence even if it would normally be inadmissible in a court of law – "hearsay," for example.[72] This was clearly reasonable, for nobody was going to be punished on the basis of the Court of Inquiry alone, and the evidence taken by the Inquiry was not available to a court of law or even to a subsequent

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court-martial. In fact all the proceedings were confidential and could not be disclosed; the Court normally sat in private.[73]

The date, time and place for the Court of Inquiry were normally decided in consultation with the Air Ministry's special Accident Investigation Branch, and if the branch decides to attach a representative to the Court he is at liberty to question witnesses.[74] In this particular case, however, there was no A.I.B. representative attached to the Court during its first inquiry. Normally the President and members of the Court were drawn from the regular R.A.F. officers' ranks. The President was a senior officer from the R.A.F. command convening the Court of Inquiry: the Liberator concerned was from an R.A.F. Transport Command unit, No. 511 Squadron, but as the crash had occurred within the limits of R.A.F. Gibraltar, a Coastal Command station, it was for the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief of Coastal Command, Air Marshal Sir J. C. Slessor, to convene the Inquiry.[75]

The Court of Inquiry into the crash of General Sikorski's aircraft, Liberator AL523, formally opened at Air Headquarters, in Gibraltar town, on July 7, 1943. An officer from R.A.F. station, Turnberry – Group Captain John G. Elton, D.F.C., A.F.C. – was President, and there were two R.A.F. officers as members, and an observer from Headquarters, Transport Command, the command in which Flight Lieutenant Prchal served; the other observer was of course the Polish Air Force officer.[76]

During the following weeks over thirty witnesses were called, some of them several times, and their evidence was taken separately on oath. None was legally represented, and none knew the testimony of the others. After each had made a statement, which was taken down in longhand – or sometimes merely submitted in writing to the Court – questions were put to him by the President.[77] These were sometimes recorded as plain prose, written in the regulation police-court first person style, and sometimes in verbatim question-and-answer form when the Court thought fit.[78] For some reason, this Court only questioned British officers and serving personnel, although there was no such limitation in its regulations.

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In view of the importance which was of course attached to the Court's terminal findings on Flight Lieutenant Prchal it will later be necessary to follow its proceedings in great detail. The whole of the first day, July 7, was spent by the Court in familiarising itself with the layout of the Gibraltar airfield, its security precautions, and the location of the Liberator's wreckage. Examination of the airfield's records showed that there had been nothing unusual in the weather conditions on the night of the crash: there had been a light (five knot) easterly wind, the night sky had been completely cloudless and visibility had been about ten miles.[79] The Court's officers went out in a launch and watched the salvage operations proceeding, and they made preparations to examine the first witness on the following day: Flight Lieutenant Prchal himself.[80]

on the seabed, Lieutenant William Bailey's Underwater Working Party set out string lines across the whole crash site, dividing the sandy seabed into four-foot wide lanes. These were methodically searched from one end to the other, right out into water almost too deep to dive in. No instructions had been given to him to search for any debris obviously foreign to an aircraft or its cargo, nor was he asked to prolong his search for the apparently missing bodies. Bailey now says, "Nobody seemed to know how many people were on the aircraft in the first place." He resolved to keep up his salvage work until he considered all the valuables had been recovered.[81]

Bailey and his divers sent up bag after bag of oddments on the shot line lowered by their tender, and these were emptied out and promptly sent down to be refilled. A Charlie Chaplin film was found – it took ages for the divers to haul the swathes of film up into the boat. Some of the stuff seemed even more out of place: on one occasion, while he was getting some fresh air on the vessel's deck, a heavy wooden crate looking rather like a box of port wine bottles, was sent up from the seabed; but when they opened it up, the seamen found a score of new cameras packed in boxes. They had somehow been thrown clear of the fuselage. A three-tier case containing some evidently valuable jewellery was recovered. Bailey has also described how he found the seabed littered with scores of boxes of

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Turkish Delight.[82] Nor was this the only unusual consignment apparently being carried by the Liberator, as the Poles, who had the task of sorting through the mound of debris, soon found out.

Tadeusz Ullmann, the observer sent out by the Polish Ministry of the Interior, has spoken of the amazement felt at the vast quantity of clothes that was dredged up, trunks and suitcases full of nothing else, and nobody knew whose they were.[83] There was a number of furs as well.[84] This whole stinking mass was piled into a special room in the Governor's Palace, to speed the process of its drying out. For several days after the crash, still further bundles of £1 notes were washed ashore from the wreckage – totalling eventually many hundreds of pounds. All these notes were peeled apart and laid out to dry individually on the beautiful rose bushes in the Governor's garden – it must have been a curious spectacle. The notes were never claimed, so they were turned over to the Colonial Office.[85]

In addition, there was a quantity of British official luggage, including heavily sealed packets, which were found to contain bulky lists of names and addresses endorsed to the effect that they came into force only from July 24, 1943. These were turned over to the British authorities, to whom, according to Lt. Lubienski, they came as a surprise since they proved to contain the names of personnel to take part in the invasion of Sicily; they had been prepared for the postal authorities in Britain and naturally were highly secret up to a certain date.[86] Also handed to the authorities were some pouches containing very high-level confidential diplomatic papers: these latter were sorted by a British Intelligence officer and dried out elsewhere in the Governor's Palace. It was obvious to him that they were papers from a diplomatic bag, and this suggested that one of the people on the aircraft must have been a King's Messenger.[87] But there was no such passenger known to have embarked, except perhaps for the mysterious Mr Lock or Mr Pinder. Lt. Lubienski later stated that "Mr Pinder" was in fact head of the British Intelligence Service in the Middle East.[88]

Not all the materials recovered from the seabed reached the Polish delegates. Wing Commander Stevens, the R.A.F. station's technical officer, was standing on the deck of the salvage vessel when another

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batch of large suitcases was sent up by the divers. Out of curiosity, he forced the lock on one of the cases himself, and was mildly surprised to find it packed full of identical Leica cameras, brand new and in leather cases. He took the case to the Station Photographic Officer to see whether the cameras could be salvaged; but that was the last he heard of them.[89]

Also miraculously salvaged from the wreckage was the cigarette case given to Edward Prchal in Cairo by General Sikorski. Lt. Lubienski had it repaired and it was returned to the pilot, lying injured in hospital, and his delight can be imagined.[90]

late on July 7, Tadeusz Ullmann received word from his superiors in London that the Polish destroyer *Orkan* would arrive early next morning to carry away the bodies of the Polish victims.[91] The Fortress commander and the Governor arranged that the coffins of General Sikorski and his Chief of Staff General Klimecki should be borne in solemn procession through the streets of Gibraltar to the dockyard, where the destroyer would be waiting. The procession would begin at 8.15 A.M., and be preceded by a service in the cathedral, where the coffins still lay, covered with the Polish flags and laden with wreaths – tributes from the President of Poland, the National Council, the Council of Ministers, the Polish armed forces and all the foreign missions and British military and municipal authorities in Gibraltar.[92]

During the day, the body of one more member of the Liberator's crew had been recovered, but it was becoming obvious that some bodies, particularly that of the daughter of General Sikorski, would not be found. *Moorhill* was ordered to stay out all night continuing the salvage work by floodlight, but the vessel's dynamo failed, as did the emergency lighting set provided by the R.A.F. The Navy forbade the use of searchlights because of certain naval movements in the Straits planned after two A.M., and nothing much was accomplished in these hours of darkness.[93]

Towards midnight Lubienski paid one last visit to the cathedral – and found himself in the midst of the most horrifying situation of his life. The Polish soldiers who should have been guarding the cof-

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fins as they lay in state, were standing on the cathedral steps, mumbling that there were *ghosts* inside. Lubienski was puzzled, but told them not to be ridiculous: "Ghosts in a cathedral!" As he ran into the cathedral, he was aware of two things – an almost unbearable odour and a low creaking sound. Both were unmistakably coming from the direction of the catafalque. Lubienski took only seconds to find the cause: he lifted the drapes on Sikorski's coffin and saw to his horror that it had burst. In the terrific heat of Gibraltar in July, the mortal remains of General Sikorski had decomposed so fast, wrapped as they were in the still sodden naval blanket, that the pent-up gases had burst the coffin's zinc lining like a bomb, causing a number of gruesome subsidiary effects defying all description.[94]

From the creaking and groaning coming from the neighbouring coffin, Lubienski was in no doubt but that a similar misfortune was about to befall Sikorski's Chief of Staff. The funeral service was to be held at eight o'clock next morning, and could not be postponed – all the guests had been invited, and the destroyer's sailing could not be delayed. Lubienski sounded the alarm: the anguished lieutenant telephoned the Governor's Palace, and asked for Mason-Macfarlane and Mr Ullmann to be roused. Neither of them woke too readily, as the latter had spent all the previous night flying out from England in a Dakota, and Macfarlane was due to leave for twenty-four hours in Seville as soon as the funeral was over.

Macfarlane called in Major-General Hyland, and Hyland summoned his chief engineering officer; the Governor telephoned through to Flight Lieutenant Perry, his A.D.C., and ordered him to collect the two coffins from the cathedral and drive them in his jeep straight to the mortuary for immediate replacement.[95] Fortunately there were two coffins spare, since two Poles had not been found. In the mortuary, the two disintegrating coffins were broken open. Such a stench emerged from them that the normally impassive Spaniards fled. Lubienski and Rosycki steeled themselves to the task – "they are *our* generals," said Lubienski – and transferred the remains to the new coffins, thankful now that the bodies had been left wrapped in their naval blankets. While a party of troops cleaned out and fumigated the whole cathedral, and frantically put out new arrays of

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flowers, the two new coffins were relined inside and out, and welded shut. By eight A.M. the cathedral was fresh and beautiful again, with barely minutes to spare before the congregation was allowed in.

Even then all did not go well: there seemed to be a curse on everything connected with the Sikorski tragedy, evilly bent on making a farce of its most solemn hours. Mason-Macfarlane had ordered Flight Lieutenant Perry to collect the coffin with Victor Cazalet's body from the mortuary, load it onto the back of his jeep and drive it unobtrusively down to the naval dockyard where he was to have it shipped straight onto the Polish destroyer before the big funeral procession arrived with the coffins of Sikorski and his Chief of Staff; the destroyer could then leave as a fitting end to the ceremony.

When the Air Force officer reached the dockyard with his rattling wooden load at about eight o'clock on the morning of July 8, the Polish destroyer captain refused to take the coffin on board. He bluntly informed Perry that it was bad enough that he had to carry Sikorski's coffin – every naval tradition cried out against it. Perry broke it to the Pole that the procession was also bringing Klimecki's coffin; the destroyer captain said he did not care, he was taking just the one – Sikorski's. It was out of the question for him to take the British M.P.'s coffin as well.

In the distance, Perry could hear Chopin's Funeral March, and the clatter of wheels and marching feet, still several streets away. He frantically begged the naval officer to take Cazalet's coffin on board and conceal it below before the cortège arrived – to no effect. As the head of the procession moved in through Southpart Gates, Flight Lieutenant Perry admitted defeat and backed his jeep and its coffin ungratefully round behind a large building, where it remained out of sight until the coast was clear. "I drove Victor back to the mortuary at ten A.M."

Flags at half mast, and with a British military band playing soft music on the quay, *Orkan* left the busy Gibraltar dockyard and slipped out to sea, under the curious binoculared stare of the German agent across the frontier. Most of the Polish Government delegation accompanied the coffins, and the first consignment of Polish property dredged up from the seabed had been put on board as

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well. Mr Tadeusz Ullmann would remain until he was satisfied how the R.A.F. Court of Inquiry was proceeding.

(v)

"I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God."

The scene was the Gibraltar military hospital where Flight Lieutenant Edward Maks Prchal, Captain of the crashed Liberator AL523 and sole survivor of the tragedy, was sworn in by the R.A.F. Court of Inquiry on July 8. Since in this case it appeared *prima facie* that the Inquiry might affect his character or professional reputation, he was given formal notice of his rights under the Court of Inquiry rules: he had a right to be represented, but only at his own cost; above all he could not be compelled to answer any question which he felt might incriminate him. The proceedings opened with Prchal formally dictating a statement on his version of how the accident occurred.[96]

There is little doubt but that Prchal won the Court's sympathy. His youthful face was heavily bandaged, and he was allowed to give his evidence from bed. He seemed to typify all that was good in the struggle of the little countries against Fascism. Prchal in particular had no reason to like the Germans: he had escaped from Germany earlier in the war only after being twice brutally beaten by the Gestapo, and in a manner which was sufficiently unusual for him to have been posted to No. 1425 Flight, the precursor of No. 511 Squadron, with a label that this officer was never to be sent on operations where he might fall back into German hands. He had, his then Flight Commander believed, still got fragments of a bullet in his body. Prchal had been an airline pilot before the war, but it was indicative of his great flying skill that he had been posted to such a secret Flight as No. 1425, which was known as "No. 10 Downing-street's taxi service." He was in fact the only foreign born Captain of Aircraft in that flight.

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Later in the Inquiry, Prchal's superiors had words of high praise for him. His present Flight Commander, flown specially out to Gibraltar, stated that his ability was exceptional. On one occasion he had put a Hudson aircraft down at Gibraltar in a fog at night and without blind approach facilities – surely the pilot's nightmare.[97] For a long time, it was said by others, Prchal was one of only five pilots allowed to land at Gibraltar by night.[98] He had never been known to leave anything to chance, no matter how slight: "He exercises good discipline with his crew." The Flight Commander concerned, Squadron-Leader J. F. Sach, went so far as to tell the Court that he regarded Prchal as "the most valued Captain in the Squadron."

As Prchal's statement was laboriously written down in longhand by one of the Court's officers, the following picture emerged: at 10.40 P.M. on the evening of the crash, Prchal had boarded his Liberator and satisfied himself that everything was in order. Before take-off, his Flight Engineer, Sergeant Kelly, had informed him that all eleven passengers were properly seated, five on mattresses in the converted bomb bay and six in the fuselage proper. (Only the latter were in seats fitted with safety belts, it was later established.[99]) There was, Prchal recalled, one more passenger than when they had taken off from Cairo. The extra passenger, the Polish secret agent from Warsaw, had been given a place in the bomb bay. "The all-up weight was approximately 52,000 pounds. I was quite satisfied with the disposal of the load."[100]

Prchal had started his engines and warmed them up, then taxied to the western end of the runway where he carried out the normal cockpit check. "Everything was satisfactory," he reiterated. At 11.10 P.M. he had seen the green lamp signal, and began his take-off run. At about 130 miles per hour he was airborne, and "on reaching 150 feet" he had eased his control column forward to gather speed. His speed had thereupon built up to 165 miles per hour and he had judged it was time to resume his climb. "I wanted to climb again, so attempted to pull back the control column, but I could not do so. The control column was definitely locked." This sudden and inex-

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plicable locking of the elevator controls was to become the keystone of all his subsequent statements on the crash's cause.

He had shouted over the intercom microphone to his co-pilot, Squadron Leader Herring, ordering him to "Check over the controls quickly." He had put on trim in an endeavour to gain height, "but nothing happened." All this time he had continued to pull back his control column, but it would not, he said, move. Herring made no reply over the intercom, said Prchal, and he could see the water coming up to meet them. He had shouted "*crash-landing*" and closed the throttles on the engines. After the plane had hit the sea, he recalled no more.

This testimony was broadly in agreement with the eye-witness descriptions current in Gibraltar, and on internal evidence it could not be challenged. His take-off speed was about correct, but only on the assumption that the Liberator was very heavily laden indeed: the take-off speed for the B-24C Liberator was 110 m.p.h. at 50,000 pounds all-up weight, and 130 m.p.h. at well over maximum load – an all-up weight of 62,000 pounds.[101] And Flight Lieutenant Prchal gave his Liberator's all-up weight as only "approximately 52,000 pounds." On the other hand, his take-off technique – gaining a certain altitude and then easing the controls forward to gain speed, carried a note of warning in the manual: "Don't become over-anxious about building up climbing speed. It takes time for the power of the propeller thrust to overcome the inertia of a heavy airplane. Beware of lowering the nose below level flight to build up airspeed. This changes the lift and tends to fly you into the ground."[102]

The Court may have felt that so long as there appeared to be a defect in the aircraft's elevator controls, there was little profit to be had from examining Prchal's flying procedure, or that given the fact of Prchal's outstanding flying ability, he could be expected to develop his own technique and not necessarily follow the book. "The manual was only a guide," Squadron Leader Sach has commented to this author.

In reply to a question from the Court's President, Group Captain Elton, Prchal stated that he had flown "nearly 500 hours" as first pilot in Liberators[103] – testimony indeed to his vast experience; his

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co-pilot had had only fifteen hours' night-flying experience as co-pilot in Liberators. Prchal was asked how long he had known Herring.

"Not long," he answered. "He had been with me as second pilot since leaving England on this trip and he had not flown with me before." But he added that on the two take-offs on this trip, one at night at Lyneham, Wiltshire, and the other from Cairo in daylight, Herring had carried out the drill quite normally.

The President asked him, "Have you ever experienced controls becoming locked in flight on a Liberator before?"

Prchal replied that he had – once when taking off with a Squadron-Leader McPhail as second pilot, at Lyneham: "Squadron-Leader McPhail was second pilot and had unlocked the controls prior to take-off, and when nearly airborne I found I could not move the rudders and realised the controls had been relocked. I shouted over the intercommunication to him to unlock them." He continued that he had been able to complete the take-off although he had swung off the runway a little as a result of this unnerving incident. He had reported it to his Flight Commander and to the remaining pilots in the Squadron.[104]

This was the first of a series of precedents which Prchal was to bring up when questioned on later occasions about this accident. In 1953, Prchal alleged that it had been caused by a certain technical fault which had "occurred in other Liberators."[105] He has recently told this author that in the spring of 1944 he witnessed an identical defect seize a Liberator high over Montreal. It emerged from the clouds, then suddenly dived and crashed into some houses. "Funnily enough, that pilot was Polish." Asked whether the pilot himself had told him the cause was the same, Prchal replied that the whole crew was killed; this leaves an obvious question unanswered.[106] In any event, the American manufacturers of Liberator AL523 have insisted that the B-24 Liberator had no history of elevator jamming: there was one instance recorded, caused by a loose bolt lodging in the elevator mechanism,[107] but as will become clear from later testi-

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mony to the Gibraltar Court of Inquiry nothing like that had occurred with Liberator AL523.

In July 1943, the R.A.F. Court was rightly concerned only with this crash. Flight Lieutenant Prchal's cross-examination ended soon after with a series of technical questions: Who normally operated the flap control? Did the control column feel that it was trying to go forwards? Was it rigid, or was there any play in it? Was he satisfied that the control surfaces, including the elevators, were functioning correctly as the aircraft left the ground?

To this latter question, Prchal replied, "Yes, definitely." To all the others he gave the expected answers or said he could not remember.

Group Captain Elton inquired, "What were the weather conditions like at take-off?"

Prchal said: "Perfect: calm, visibility fifteen to twenty miles." He added, "I was able to see the horizon clearly."

This detail might usefully have been queried by the Court. Prchal was taking off towards the east, heading out to sea at dead of a moonless night. The eastern horizon would probably have been invisible. Perhaps the Court assumed that Prchal had taken off on instruments alone – for such were the regulations in any heavy aircraft. But at this stage, this was not established, and Prchal's assertion remained unchallenged.[108]

It was clear that much would depend on what the technical examination of the wreckage yielded. At the same time as Prchal was being interrogated in hospital, the badly damaged fuselage shell of the Liberator was finally lifted out of the sea by *Moorhill*.[109] Liberators were known as aircraft almost impossible to ditch safely, as they seldom floated long: their weak alloy bomb doors invariably crumpled under the weight of the aircraft, and allowed the sea to swamp the plane's interior within seconds.[110] This Liberator had evidently been no exception. The fuselage section now salvaged – the portion from just aft of the bomb bay to where the tail section had broken off – was very badly damaged indeed: none of the flooring had remained intact; the section salvaged consisted of just the roof and sides. It was small wonder that nobody but the pilot had survived.

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By evening, the tail unit had also been hoisted right out of the sea by *Moorhill* and transferred on a naval lighter to the R.A.F.'s New Camp. Here it was inspected by R.A.F. Gibraltar's Chief Technical Officer, Wing Commander Arthur Stevens, an officer who had for some time himself been a member of the Accident Investigation Branch and knew the kind of thing to look for. He found that the whole tail unit, which was complete with elevators, fins and rudders, had broken off the fuselage just forward of the leading edge of the tailplane; in other words it was virtually intact. Since Prchal was insisting that the cause of the crash had been the blockage, or jamming, of his elevator controls, Stevens's first action was to inspect the elevators: the trimming tabs were almost in the neutral position, and the elevators themselves were free to move except for some damage to the skin on one end, which prevented them from moving their full travel up and down. This had evidently been damaged in the crash, so it had not caused it.[111]

At six P.M. *Moorhill* left the scene, her salvage work complete. Two diving boats were left at anchor at the accident site.

within a day or two of his interrogation by the Court, Prchal was visited in hospital by the Flying Control Officer who had been on duty on the night of the crash; the latter asked him privately whether he knew what had caused the accident.[112] Prchal "nodded meaningfully," and replied that the second pilot, Squadron Leader Herring – who was now listed as missing, presumed killed[113] – was not conversant with this type of aircraft and had made two errors: he had thought it was his job to raise the undercarriage, and in doing so he had mistakenly operated the controls locking-lever, a lever normally operated when the plane is parked on a windy airfield or taxying, to lock the control surfaces to prevent them from being damaged by sudden gusts or bumps.

There are technical reasons why this theory of Flight Lieutenant Prchal's is untenable; but that he should have suggested it was consistent with the impression of Prchal formed at the Inquiry by Wing Commander Roland Falk, who was later called as an expert witness since he was at the time Chief Test Pilot at the Royal Aircraft Estab-

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lishment, Farnborough. Wing Commander Falk has lately written to this author, "When I saw Prchal at the Inquiry, he was still suffering badly from the injuries which he sustained in the crash and was clearly unable to explain to himself the reason for what had happened. The one thing which appeared to be firmly imprinted in his mind was that the control column was locked when he crashed."

if the Liberator's controls had somehow been jammed by an ingenious act of sabotage, this must presumably have been perpetrated during the thirty hours in which the plane was parked on the airfield at Gibraltar's North Front. In the days immediately following the crash, the R.A.F. station had conducted its own private and anguished investigation of the precautions that had been taken with AL523, aware that the visiting Court officers would report most unfavourably on any laxity that they discovered, whether or not it had contributed to the crash. Almost at once the exceptional precaution taken by Sergeant Moore – in providing a corporal to sleep in the fuselage all night – was brought to light. The R.A.F. heaved an audible sigh of relief. Moore was summoned to the station commander and warmly commended on his initiative, which had saved the R.A.F.'s bacon: "Off the hook" was the phrase Group Captain Bolland actually used.[114]

On the afternoon of July 8, Bolland testified before the Court of Inquiry on the security precautions he had taken.[115] He described how during the daylight hours, security police checked the passes of all civilians at entrances to the station, and the frontier fences and beaches bordering on the airfield were patrolled by British troops. Additionally, a roving patrol guarded the area where freight and passenger aircraft were parked. By night the entire airfield was floodlit, and the guard was increased to six officers and a hundred N.C.O.s and men with an emergency reserve of forty more. These patrols were assisted by guard dogs on the eastern beach and the western extension of the runway into Gibraltar Bay.

Then he played his trump card: with Flight Lieutenant Prchal's Liberator, additional precautions had been taken. A sentry had been posted by the aircraft with a list of names of airmen and transporta-

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tion personnel likely to want to work on or board it. "In addition, a Corporal (F. E. Hopgood) of 511 Squadron slept in the aircraft on the night of July 3–4." Bolland went on to explain: "Special guards are only provided for aircraft carrying most important passengers, at the pilot's request because he is carrying special freight, or because the aircraft is fitted with exceptionally secret equipment." (In fact both Sergeant Moore and Corporal Hopgood have told this author that the precaution of having an N.C.O. sleep aboard a 511 Squadron aircraft was unique to this occasion.)[116]

Group Captain Bolland was requested to describe the precautions taken to prevent unauthorised persons from deviating from the road between Gibraltar and La Linea, which led directly across the middle of the runway. Bolland stated that all gaps in the fence were constantly guarded by British troops.

In general, Bolland's evidence was internally consistent and agreed both with the regulations and with what others have described.

The Army officer who had provided the military guard for the Liberator was called to give evidence. His position was less enviable than Bolland's, as there had been demonstrable slackness among the sentries early on Sunday morning, as was later to be established. He said that a sentry had been posted on the plane throughout its stay, and provided with a list of people allowed near it. No reports had reached him of unauthorised attempts to approach the aircraft; from time to time he and his officers had inspected the sentry guard and found all to be well.[117]

This evidence was broadly confirmed by the R.A.F. sergeant in charge of No. 511 squadron's Maintenance Section on the airfield, Sergeant Norman Moore.[118] He described how he had been waiting with his ten airmen to service AL523 as soon as it landed on July 3. Both Flight Lieutenant Prchal and Flight Sergeant Kelly, his flight engineer, had told him that the Liberator was in good order. He had himself given the order for a corporal to remain in the aircraft near the door all night. Some time after nine P.M. on the Saturday evening, he had asked the sentry provided by the Army whether he had a list of people permitted aboard the aircraft and, on being told that he had not, he had given him a list of all the airmen in his maintenance

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party. He had instructed the sentry that these men would vouch for any other people allowed to board the aircraft.

He had seen Corporal Davis, his senior corporal, some time after seven A.M. on Sunday morning, but there were no reports of any unusual incidents. "I concluded that everything was in order," Moore said.

He had personally signed the Liberator's Travelling Form 700 – its maintenance sheet – and was "absolutely convinced" that the aircraft was serviceable. (The form could not be produced at the Inquiry as it had been destroyed in the crash, but Moore and his mechanics Gibbs and Alexander testified that they had carried out the prescribed daily inspections and found all to be in order.[119]) On the following day, the Army's Captain Williams was recalled and he corroborated the details given by Moore as far as the sentry organisation was concerned.[120] Corporal Davis was also questioned, and he made a written statement that neither Corporal Hopgood – who had slept in the aircraft – nor any of the Army sentries had reported any unusual occurrence to him.[121]

In fact there *had* been a minor occurrence, as the next witness, Corporal Hopgood himself, reported: about half an hour before he went off duty at 7.30 A.M. on Sunday morning, an airman had entered the aircraft and removed a package from the bomb bay; Hopgood had recognised this airman as belonging to the station's Air Despatch and Reception Unit (A.D.R.U.), the unit concerned with passenger and cargo processing.[122] This was noted by the Court, and they resolved to recall earlier witnesses, especially those who had suggested that nothing had occurred during the hours of their sentry duty.

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During the afternoon of July 9, salvage operations were temporarily abandoned as the weather had worsened: Levantine conditions had brought a heavy swell, dangerous for small boats; the lighters could not moor over the crash site, nor could the divers work safely below.[123]

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For the Poles, the problem of the victims' coffins remained. The captain of *Orkan* had refused to accept any coffins other than those of Sikorski and Klimecki; all the others had been covered with lead sheet and packed into crates to await shipment to England in a merchant ship. During the evening, Bombardier Gralewski was buried in the crowded Gibraltar cemetery between the Rock's face and the airfield from which his short journey to a new life had begun; Polish troops mounted a guard of honour, and British soldiers fired a rifle salute as the coffin was laid to rest.[124]

During the day, the body of Colonel Marecki had also been washed ashore, badly mauled by the beasts of the sea and the battering it had received. Lubienski went to identify him, then placed him in a coffin "properly prepared for transportation." Madame Lesniowska's body had still not been found, and the bodies of two of the crew and two of the passengers – including the supposed "King's Messenger," Mr W. H. Lock – were still missing.

In private discussion with the naval authorities at Gibraltar, Flight Lieutenant Posgate, who had captained the second high-speed launch at the scene of the crash, said he thought he knew why some of the bodies were still missing: it seemed to him possible that the pilot was not alone in having survived the crash. If it was accepted that the wreckage had taken a few minutes to founder, he believed that other survivors, some more seriously injured than others, had endeavoured to extricate themselves: "Their first consideration would naturally be the General and his daughter." This would explain how the V.I.P.s had been recovered at once either dead (like Sikorski and Klimecki) or dying (like Brigadier Whiteley). Of the others in the upper forward part of the fuselage – the second pilot, Madame Lesniowska and Sikorski's secretary Kulakowski, Posgate believed: "It seems possible that these three did manage to extricate themselves from the aircraft and possibly remained afloat for a brief period, but subsequently because of their injuries were drowned." They might have drifted on in the darkness and been missed by the high-speed launches arriving minutes later.[125] If Posgate's theory was correct, it was an obvious conclusion that had more of the passengers had the foresight to wear their Mae Wests, as had the pilot, he might not have been the only one to survive.

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5: Mr Churchill Kneels in Prayer

General Sikorski's body had now reached English soil. The destroyer *Orkan* berthed in Plymouth dockyard on July 10, and the coffins were that night transferred to a special railway coach for their solemn return to London. The coach had been arranged like a small Catholic chapel, and it was decked out with red and white wreaths and the flag and standards of Poland. The carriage floor was strewn with flowers and grasses gathered from the gardens of Gibraltar and brought to England with the destroyer. From Plymouth one of the destroyer's seamen telephoned the Sailor's Home in London where so many of them had stayed: "We are doomed," he told the housekeeper there. "We brought a body back on board." It was only a naval superstition, but *Orkan* was lost at sea with all hands, precisely three months afterwards.[1]

As the special train steamed through the West Country night, towards London, the German propaganda radio was manufacturing fresh discontent about Sikorski's death: was it not strange that the British War Minister, Sir James Grigg, had at the last moment cancelled his plans to travel to London on Sikorski's plane?[2] Why had General Sikorski's plane been guarded by five sentries, according to reports from the Spanish frontier, when no such precaution had been deemed necessary for the King's personal plane when it was standing on the airfield?[3] Nor was Grigg the only V.I.P. passen-

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ger to have had second thoughts about travelling with Sikorski, according to the Germans. William Joyce broadcast to England the spurious news that "a King's Messenger of the British Foreign Office likewise preferred to give up his seat."[4]

A guard of honour of Grenadier Guards met the train as it steamed into Paddington Station, and somewhere a band struck up the Polish National Anthem. Eight Polish soldiers shouldered the coffin of General Sikorski to a waiting car. The coffin lay in state in the Polish Government's headquarters in Kensington Palace Gardens until July 14; Sikorski's sword and cap rested on the coffin, and a bunch of yellow roses from his widow lay at its foot. Then the body was placed in Westminster Cathedral. The President of the Polish Republic laid the Mary-blue ribbon and decoration of the Order of the White Eagle on the coffin, and Sikorski's other decorations were spread out in velvet along the front.

That evening, Mr Churchill broadcast to Poles throughout the world and in occupied Poland: "I mourn with you the tragic loss of your Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief, General Sikorski. I knew him well. He was a statesman, a soldier, a comrade, an ally, and above all a Pole. He is gone, but if he were at my side I think he would wish me to say this – and I say it from my heart: soldiers must die, but by their death they nourish the nation which gave them birth." Sikorski had died for his country and "the common cause." Mr Churchill urged all Poles everywhere to be prepared to die for Poland.[5]

On the following morning, as flags flew at half mast on all Government buildings in London and Gibraltar, three Prime Ministers – of Britain, Poland and Czechoslovakia – came to the Requiem Mass held for their dead friend and colleague. Many saw tears in Mr Churchill's eyes as the service began, but two simple acts by the British Prime Minister drew the main comment from newspapermen whispering among themselves in a gallery overlooking the sanctuary: first they noticed how Mr and Mrs Churchill knelt for some moments before taking their seats; then at the end of the Mass both took away their copies of the little black Requiem Mass booklets provided for the more distinguished mourners.

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Once, in turning, Mr Churchill happened to catch the eye of a member of the new Polish Government, and they exchanged a momentary glance. The newspapermen noticed that Churchill was obviously at ease even in a strange religion's place of worship. "He's always so natural," somebody remarked. Round the coffin, high up before the Sanctuary, stood six Polish airmen, sailors and soldiers and their officer, with rifles sloped and bayonets fixed. The yellow roses at the coffin's foot had begun to fade already.[6]

In accordance with Mr Churchill's wishes, most of his senior colleagues were in attendance – Eden, Anderson, Bevin, Alexander, Wood and the Chiefs of Staff. General Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, saw the symbolism clearer than most. To him the service had seemed too fussy and theatrical at first, and it was only at the very end that his feelings were stirred: "When I saw the empty stand where the coffin had been, with six *cierges* burning round it, and on either flank representative colours of Regiments borne by officer parties, it struck me as a sad picture of Poland's plight: both its State and Army left without a leader when a change of the tide seems in sight."[7]

As a soldier, Brooke had been very fond of Sikorski – struck like so many by his charm and honesty[8] – and he admitted that he would miss him badly. Sikorski was the one man who might have saved Poland in the end, for it was Sikorski who had established the most promising relationship with Stalin; but Brooke, like many others, was not to realise this until later.[9]

As a hidden choir of Polish soldiers burst out splendidly into the Polish Army hymn, the coffin was borne out of the cathedral and driven away through the crowded streets of Pimlico. By the following day, it had reached the cemetery at Newark in Nottinghamshire where the hundreds of Polish airmen who had died in the skies over Britain now lay buried; the coffin was to rest in a special brick-lined vault until the war was over, when, the widow was promised, General Sikorski's remains would be returned in triumph to Poland.

General Kazimierz Sosnkowski, the new Polish Commander-in-Chief, spoke the last farewell: "Sleep in peace amongst your winged soldiers, true sons of Poland all, who like you have given their lives

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for her. Soldiers of the Polish Republic, at my command: we pay our last respects to our late Commander-in-Chief, who has died at his post. Atten——tion!"

Again the Polish National Anthem sounded; on a hot July day in the Midlands of England, a volley of rifle shots rang out. The coffin wrapped in the red and white flag of Poland was slowly lowered into the vault, and General Sikorski's long journey from Cairo was at an end. The President of Poland knelt by the grave, his face averted, and threw in a handful of Polish soil.[10]

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6: Mailbags and Manifests

During the latter part of July 9 and the following days, the R.A.F. Court of Inquiry at Gibraltar tried to establish who and what was on the Liberator aircraft at the time of its crash. The latter was to prove unexpectedly difficult.

The crew was known, of course.[1] There was no difficulty about the passengers but, although this was apparently of less importance, there was uncertainty about the cargo. An R.A.F. corporal testified that between half past ten and a quarter to eleven on the fateful evening he had stowed a dozen pieces of personal luggage in the Liberator's bomb bay on both sides of the forward portion[2]; but this was probably the passengers' registered baggage being re-stowed after their overnight stay at Government House.[3] The corporal confirmed that he was well aware of the importance of ensuring that the baggage was not allowed to foul the control system: "in this instance I lashed the baggage down."

Next the Court turned to the question of the passengers believed to have been carried. An embarkation officer described the decision to allow an extra passenger to join the aircraft – the unlucky Polish Bombardier Gralewski. This embarkation officer, Pilot Officer Harold Briggs, described: "I received a telephone call from Government House asking whether an additional passenger could be carried in Liberator AL523 due to depart that evening. I spoke to the

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Captain of the aircraft on the telephone and he agreed that this passenger could be carried." The pilot's copy of Form 1256, the "passenger manifest," had been signed to this effect.

Here the first irregular feature of this crash was revealed. The Court's President asked Briggs whether he could produce a copy of this Liberator's manifest. Briggs was obliged to answer that he could not. Flight Lieutenant Prchal had retained the copy he had seen, and that was the only copy available. As far as he recalled it described the plane's payload on arrival at Gibraltar as 5,540 pounds. (There was a section at the top of Form 1256 giving the aircraft's all-up weight, its take-off weight and estimated landing-weight.) In something of an outburst, Pilot Officer Briggs – who knew that a breach of regulations was about to be revealed – asserted: "We never receive a copy of the manifest on aircraft arriving from Cairo although it is laid down in the distribution instructions on Form 1256 that we should receive one." He added that he considered it essential to have a copy of the manifest, but "we have applied for one on several occasions without success."[4]

Perhaps he should have made it plainer to the Court that his strictures applied not to all aircraft coming from Cairo, but only to the V.I.P. transport planes like this Liberator; that is certainly what he meant to convey. The consequence of his not seeing the manifest was that he had no check on the passengers being carried by the aircraft, and no control on its loading: "The load carried by the aircraft had to be left entirely to the pilot if the manifest was not produced to A.D.R.U.," as Briggs now says.[5] Somewhat surprisingly, no further questions were asked by the Court along this line. The Court subsequently recommended that the instructions for the distribution of the aircraft manifest given on that form should be adhered to.[6] No attempt was made to investigate *why* the manifest should regularly be missing on a certain run or to draw possible conclusions from this, bearing on the present case.

An additional mystery, which may well have had some remote connection with the questions of the missing manifest, the aircraft's payload and the acceptance of an extra passenger, was revealed almost at once. After further evidence had been given by Gibraltar

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embarkation officers and by the Governor's A.D.C., Flight Lieutenant Perry, to confirm that the eleven passengers had in fact been brought to and boarded the plane,[7] Group Captain Bolland, the station commander, reappeared before the Court with the startling news that on July 5 a gunner on duty at the gunsite on the western end of the runway had picked up a mailbag which Bolland had now established had been part of the Liberator's freight. (Bolland has since stated that had the aircraft not crashed, the mailbag would have been placed on a later plane and the incident forgotten.[8]) This incident was inexplicable: Bolland told the Court he was convinced that he would have noticed if the plane's rear hatch had not been properly closed on take off, and Air Commodore Simpson, the A.O.C., echoed this view next day.[9]

The gunner who had picked up the mailbag followed Bolland into the witness stand: he had seen the bag on the runway close to his site, which was four hundred yards from the western end of the runway. He put its weight at about fifteen pounds.[10]

Without forsaking our strict chronology we can profitably look forward a few days to the testimony given by the Captain, Flight Lieutenant Prchal, when recalled and asked for his explanation of how the mailbag came to leave the aircraft.[11] He admitted he had never heard of such a thing happening before, but suggested it might have fallen out through the nose-wheel aperture if the bag had been loaded in the nose.[12]

Prchal stated that it would not have been possible for the inside door, or the bomb bay doors, not to have been shut and to have escaped notice: at the western end of the runway, where the Liberator had waited in darkness for twenty minutes running up its engines before take-off, his Flight Engineer had "walked up and down the fuselage before reporting to me that everything was all right."

On the following day, July 10, the Court resumed its endeavours to reconstruct the aircraft's last few moments before crashing. It soon became evident that different witnesses, following the dwindling

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lights of the aircraft in the darkness, believed they had seen different things.

A Flying Control Officer testified that he had witnessed the aircraft take off normally after a run of about 1,150 yards, but then appear to level off after reaching a height of *only about thirty feet*, about a hundred yards past the tower from which he was watching; the aircraft had flown for a short distance straight and level, then "lost height steadily until it hit the sea."[13]

This evidence again seems crucial, for it was disputed by more than one of the Air Force witnesses on the ground, who were inclined to describe the plane as reaching altitudes of anything up to 100 feet. Even so, there would seem arguments for accepting the Flying Control Officer's testimony against all the others (including the pilot's). He was watching the aircraft as a duty and watching from a height; had the aircraft risen above *his* horizon, he would have known it. From his testimony, it is evident that he believed it had not.

As an officer with 7,000 hours flying experience, his opinion was, he added, that there was "no suggestion of a stall." This time the Court asked the question it had failed to ask Prchal (who had claimed to see the horizon clearly when flying eastwards at night). "In view of the fact that there was no moon, how were you able to follow the path of the aircraft so clearly?"

The officer replied, "By the navigation lights."

Air Commodore Simpson gave the same kind of evidence: the Liberator had taxied out to the western end of the runway, where "after a considerable pause," it had turned into the wind and taken off. It climbed steadily and in a perfectly normal manner, all four engines functioning properly. "I should judge it was over the east end of the runway at about 100 feet when it ceased to climb and appeared to sink slowly towards the sea. Owing to the darkness it was not possible to gauge the altitude of the aircraft. Whilst the aircraft was losing height there was no change in the note of the engines, and all four were showing the same steady blue exhaust flame that they were showing while climbing."[14]

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An airman who had been near the end of the runway also mentioned "100 feet" as the height the plane reached. He had been waiting to cross the runway, and described how as soon as he realised that the aircraft was going to crash, he had run to the dinghy's boathouse, improvised from a Spitfire crate, and together with several others he had launched the rescue dinghy. They had reached the crash scene within about five minutes, and were "hailed" by somebody in the water. It was the pilot: "He was wearing an inflated Mae West and was quite conscious although unable to speak."[15]

The R.A.F. officer commanding the Air/Sea Rescue unit confirmed this description of events. The Court asked him to relate how the bodies picked up by his launch had been clothed. The officer replied that he had picked up the bodies of the navigator, flight engineer and wireless-operator/air-gunner, all fully clothed: "None was wearing a Mae West or parachute harness." Similarly, a Polish officer recovered on July 8, had not been wearing Mae West or parachute harness. The Court asked, "Did you observe any Mae Wests floating amongst the wreckage?"

"Yes, I picked up three or four in quite good condition."[16]

Before passing on to the later stages of the Inquiry, we should examine the inferences to be drawn from the discrepancies in the different heights given for the Liberator before it began its descent to the sea. It will be recalled that Prchal had testified that his aircraft had reached "about 150 feet" before he began his process of gaining speed by easing the control column forwards. Yet his former Flight Commander, a highly qualified Liberator expert, has since stated that given the facts related by Prchal and the known characteristics of the Liberator II – rate of climb, etc. – the aircraft could certainly not have reached as much as 100 feet in the brief time that it was in the air.[17] And two independent witnesses on the ground had consistently assessed its altitude in the darkness as 100 feet, and the Flying Control Officer, who was above the aircraft's level, put it at only thirty feet.

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In this connection, one other detail can be pointed out. In 1953, when Prchal related his adventures to a Czechoslovakian journalist in London, he described how his mechanic had told him that the undercarriage was up "when we reached 300 feet," and further related how after the controls locked "the aircraft went sliding down, and as we were only 300 feet up we knew we would crash in a few seconds."[18]

When this interview was republished recently in the *Sunday Times*, many Gibraltar officers, seeing it for the first time, were amazed at the change Prchal's story had undergone. Squadron Leader Canning, the medical officer who first examined Prchal when brought ashore, was particularly concerned by it. The aircraft's greatest altitude on take-off – which he himself had witnessed from the runway's end – was nowhere near 300 feet, he says.[19]

(ii)

Colonel Victor Cazalet's relatives in England had asked that he be buried at Gibraltar, and at seven P.M. on July 12 the Governor, Lieutenant Lubienski and a small funeral procession followed his coffin to the cemetery behind the Rock where it was buried near the grave of the Polish courier, Gralewski.[20] For Mason-Macfarlane there seemed to be no end to the aftermath of this grim tragedy.

Cazalet was forty-six at the time of his death; he was Member of Parliament for East Islington, and had sat in the House for about nineteen years. In 1940 he had been appointed political liaison officer to General Sikorski and he had devoted himself to promoting the cause of Poles both inside and outside Poland. A great sportsman, he had won the singles and doubles squash rackets at Eton and gained his Blue for tennis, lawn tennis and squash at Christ Church, Oxford, subsequently representing England in squash rackets teams in the Americas.[21] The German obituaries of him were as cordial as the British, and German radio particularly stressed that Cazalet was a "deadly enemy" of Churchill.[22] This was obviously tendentious, but it is true that Cazalet had privately circulated three hundred copies of a book critical of Anglo-Soviet relations.[23] His

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death in Liberator AL523 was grist to the mill of German propaganda.

when the Court of Inquiry resumed its hearings on July 13, it again turned its attention to the adequacy of the security guard on the Liberator. It soon established that the guard had not been as perfect as the Army authorities had maintained.

It was the responsibility of No. 27 Air Despatch and Reception Unit at Gibraltar, among other duties, to remove certain diplomatic mail from aircraft arriving from the Middle East, and to transfer it to regular B.O.A.C. aircraft, which were deemed to have less likelihood of being molested by the Germans between Gibraltar and London.[24] One of this unit's airmen, Walter Titterington, now testified that an hour after Liberator AL523 arrived from Cairo on Saturday afternoon, July 3, he had removed five mailbags from its forward bomb bay; and that at seven A.M. on the following morning he had removed two more.[25] Why he should have had to make two journeys was not established, but Pilot Officer Briggs suggests as a possible reason that when the mailbags were checked against the "mail manifest" it was found that they were two short, and these two were subsequently sent for.

This was not the important point, however: what did interest the Court was that Titterington reported that on neither trip had he seen a military guard on the Liberator or been challenged; on the latter occasion, he had however encountered the R.A.F. corporal who had been asleep near the aircraft's rear hatch. This evidence was in direct conflict with the witness who followed, the Army private whose sentry duty on the Liberator had been from six to eight A.M. on Sunday morning: "During my guard," he asserted, "no one approached, entered or left the aircraft."

His corporal backed him up on this: he had also inspected the sentry "three or four times" during his two-hour duty and found all was well.[26] The mystery appeared to be short-lived, for when the R.A.F. corporal was recalled, he told the Court that not only had he seen no sentry on the aircraft when he broke off his own all-night vigil in its fuselage to meet another Liberator which arrived at 7.10

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A.M., but he was in fact unaware that any Army guard had been posted.[27] He had seen two or three sentries clustered round the aircraft's rear, standing near some Mosquitoes, and he had presumed they were guarding these. It was clear that there had been laxity in the sentries posted by the Army, and the officer reviewing the Court's findings subsequently recommended that this "should be the subject of disciplinary action."[28]

In this connection it should be pointed out that when Lieutenant Lubienski visited the aircraft during the night, he found it very efficiently guarded both by sentries and by the N.C.O. in the aircraft itself, as we have recorded earlier; but it is curious that his visit, together with Kulakowski, should not have been commented on by either Hopgood or the sentries, in the same way as the airman who called to collect the mailbags was dwelt upon.

the Inquiry had now been running for one week, and the Court was no nearer to establishing beyond doubt what had happened than on the very first day. Outside Air Headquarters, Major Dudzinski, the Polish observer, told Mr Ullmann that he was insisting that an identical Liberator Mark II be flown to Gibraltar for tests to see whether it was possible in any way to jam the elevator controls deliberately.[29] This would show whether they could have been jammed accidentally, for example by the shifting of loosely stowed baggage.

Flight Lieutenant Prchal still adhered to his claim that his controls had been blocked, despite the growing evidence that this was a technical impossibility. Towards the end of the Inquiry he was recalled as a witness and asked what he had meant by his earlier testimony that he had shouted to his second pilot, the late Squadron Leader Herring, to "check the controls." Prchal sought to imply that Herring might have accidentally operated the control-surfaces locking lever: "I meant 'unlock the controls' and I think that is what I said."[30]

It was an untenable suggestion, for a moment's examination of the locking mechanism – a system of pinions which could be driven by a crude remote control into holes in the elevator bar and similar

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moving parts of the rudder and aileron systems – showed that unless both rudder *and* elevator controls were exactly in the neutral or "locking" position none of the locking pinions could be fitted into the corresponding holes. On taking off, Prchal would have pulled the control column back, and he would have pushed it forward, neither position being the "locking" position. But Flight Lieutenant Prchal was not pressed for further details on this score.

Within a few days a Liberator Mark II identical to Liberator No. AL523 had been flown to Gibraltar for the Inquiry, and secret tests were performed on it (so secret that the Poles, for example, were unaware that they were going on). Some word of the quantity of baggage stowed "indiscriminately"[31] inside Prchal's Liberator may have reached the Court: enough people in Gibraltar knew about it by now (Bolland, Perry, Bailey, Stevens and Quayle to mention only a few). In any event, the possibility that a piece of baggage might have become lodged in the control system and produced the jamming described by Prchal led to special tests on the Liberator that now arrived.

The elevator control cables ran from the two control columns in the cockpit to the elevator mechanism in the tail – a simple bell-crank device which raised or lowered the elevator flap. The cables were in fact protected from interference by a metal shield running the length of the bomb bay – where the passengers and luggage were located – but aft of the bulkhead the cables were unshielded for the remainder of their travel to the tail.

Wing Commander Stevens conducted tests all along the cables' length, and finally concluded that it was impossible for the control cables to be jammed either by baggage or by passengers. Even when he *tried* to jam them, by clutching them, lying against them, and stuffing pieces of rag tightly between the cables and the pulleys guiding them through the bulkhead, he could produce no jamming effect whatsoever. With the elevator and rudder controls correctly aligned in the "locking" position he tried to engage the locking-control mechanism by pulling down on the locking-control cable, which also ran the length of the fuselage: "I was unable to exert sufficient

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pull on the cable to rotate the actuating pulley," he told the Court later.[32]

Try as they might, the Court's officers had still found no material evidence to support Prchal's contention that his controls had become locked. Writing in his own record of this whole episode, the Governor, Major-General Mason-Macfarlane, recalled soon after: "We experimented with other similar aircraft by loading baggage in every conceivable position, but it was clear that any hold-up in the joystick or its mechanism could not possibly have occurred through badly packed baggage shifting."[33]

Small was the wonder that when the Secretary of State for Air was asked in the House of Commons whether the report of the Court of Inquiry would be published, he replied that it would not: he hoped, he said, to make a statement in due course; he reassured the House that the Polish Government was represented at the Inquiry.[34]

calm weather returned to Gibraltar. The winds fell, and the seas subsided. For four days all salvage operations off the Eastern Beach had stopped, but on July 13 they were resumed; the Royal Navy used the respite to prepare for a close "toothcomb" search of the seabed, with Bailey's shallow-water divers working to a set scheme between the two- and five-fathom lines and extending for about two hundred yards to either side of the wreckage's epicentre; beyond the five-fathom line the seabed was searched by deep-water divers, who also handled the heavier debris. Conditions were now much less favourable than before, with still a heavy swell and strong undertow, and the quantity of sand suspended in the water reduced visibility to only a few feet.[35]

On the following day, a dredge on the lines of an enlarged "prawn dredge" was employed, towed backwards and forwards over the deeper seabed by a steamboat. Neither this nor the divers' efforts yielded anything of interest to the Inquiry.[36] Nonetheless, Wing Commander Stevens asked for the diving to continue. Next day, *Moorhill* came round the Rock and picked up the main wingspan, which had been beached in shallower water. "The unwieldy aircraft fragment was towed the six miles round the Rock to the dockyard, and the

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vessel moored alongside the gunwharf. Here tragedy struck again. As the dockside crane took the weight of the wingspan, and the fragment emerged more and more from the sea, the cable parted and whipped across the quay striking one of the Spanish dockyard workers round the throat.[37] A crowd of gesticulating workers clustered round the workman, lying motionless on the ground, then came running toward the vessel, shouting at Stevens – who was standing on its deck – "*Ha muerto! Ha muerto!*" The Spaniard's neck had been broken by the cable's lash – the last victim of the Liberator's still unexplained crash.[38]

The heavy wingspan was landed successfully on the dockside soon after, and Flight Lieutenant Buck, the Air Ministry's Accident Investigation Branch inspector, examined and partially dissected it. At every stage he paused and took detailed photographs of the vital components from all angles. The main control gear, buried in silt and sand in the wreckage of the cockpit, was sufficiently intact to provide valuable evidence. The first pilot's control column was badly jammed by sand in the fully forward position, but as soon as the sand was cleared it was found to be free to move, and this in turn freed the second pilot's control column. As to their position, Stevens later told the Inquiry that this part of the fuselage was so badly damaged that the final position of any controls working with cables (like the control columns and the controls locking-lever) was likely to be very misleading.[39]

On the following day, July 16, shallow-water divers salvaged one propeller and located another buried too deep in the sandy seabed for them to lift out. They left it there and it is probably there to this day.

As the gunwharf quay was urgently needed, the R.A.F. cut up the wingspan almost immediately into three sections, and these were removed to the R.A.F. salvage unit. On July 17, on instructions from Wing Commander Stevens, Lieutenant Lubienski and the Governor's naval liaison officer, all naval salvage work ceased. That day, Mason-Macfarlane gave a luncheon party at the Convent to express his gratitude to those who had assisted in the grisly diving opera-

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tions: Lieutenant Bailey and his chief, Commander Hancock, were invited, along with several others.[40]

After a time Flight Lieutenant Prchal, the Liberator's pilot, was also seen as a guest at Government House; Macfarlane's staff saw him limp across the stable yard and enter the Convent for lunch one day. Afterwards, Mason-Macfarlane – who prided himself as a judge of character – commented to his military adjutant: "Oh, he's a *good one* . . . he's a *good one*, that!"[41]

wing commander Stevens, chief technical officer at R.A.F. Gibraltar, was called as the Court of Inquiry's last witness. By now the interim results of R.A.E. Farnborough's investigation of certain fragments – the cause of some delay in the Inquiry at this stage – had reached Gibraltar. Stevens described what he had found on inspecting the wreckage and the pilot's controls. His description broadly conformed with Prchal's account of his actions prior to ditching: the pilot had said that his flaps were half down; Stevens found them about three-eighths down. From lack of damage to the undercarriage "up" and "down" locking positions, it seemed to Stevens that at the moment of impact the wheels were somewhere between the fully down and the fully retracted positions. All four throttle levers on the throttle pedestal were in the nearly closed position, and both the main engine ignition switches (which were on the co-pilot's ignition switch panel, out of the Captain's reach) were also found to be in the "off" position.[42] The propeller pitch-control switches on the control pedestal were all in the neutral position (while examination of the two complete engine units retrieved showed the propellers to be in fine-pitch).[43]

Stevens's evidence disposed of Prchal's contention that his second pilot might have unwittingly operated the control surfaces locking-lever, even if this were possible in flight. If the sliding pinions, which were designed to engage in holes in the moving parts of the rudder control tube and the elevator cross shaft, had been in the locking position (i.e., engaged) at the time of the crash, they would have shown "signs of having been subjected to a shear load" – in short, they would have been bent; and they were not. He had found

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that the spindle of the locking-control pulley (which actuated these pinions) was sheared, and this was the cause of a further technical investigation by the Air Ministry, who had subsequently removed the whole controls locking mechanism from the tail and sent it to Farnborough for examination. Stevens told the Court of Inquiry that he had now learned from Farnborough that this shearing had been caused by torsional stress, and this was "caused possibly in the crash."

When the Inquiry closed on July 24, it was nowhere near establishing exactly what had happened – a not uncommon circumstance where air accidents are involved. In its detailed recommendations the Court picked up the minor lapses in discipline and breaches of regulations that had been detected, none of them the pilot's, and rehearsed in broad outline what it understood to have occurred. The Court advised that all passengers, "regardless of their importance," should be properly processed before embarkation on transport aircraft, and that the regulations for the securing of loose articles should be rigorously enforced. Furthermore, the aircraft manifest was to be properly distributed – an unconscious blow to every aircrew enjoying the perks to be derived from carrying "black" luggage.

As far as Gibraltar airfield was concerned, it was agreed that its security precautions were adequate, but the dropping of flares over aircraft crash sites was deplored in view of the risk of fire, and it was considered that the rescue dinghy so thoughtfully provided by Group Captain Bolland at the runway's eastern end should have a lamp and an outboard motor fitted.[44]

All this left unresolved the main mysteries of the crash. The independent testimonies of an R.A.F. officer and an airman that they had seen Prchal picked up wearing his Mae West (one had described it as "fully inflated") were overlooked.

Also unclarified were the manner in which the mailbag had landed on the runway and the ease with which airmen on routine errands to the aircraft had escaped observation by the Army sentry posted on it.

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On the actual cause of the tragedy, the Court offered no coherent explanation. The aircraft, it concluded, had become uncontrollable for reasons which could not be established:

> The pilot, having eased the control column forward to build up speed after take-off, found that he was unable to move it back at all, the elevator controls being virtually jammed somewhere in the system. It is impossible, from the evidence available and examination of the wreckage, to offer any concrete reason as to why the elevator system should have become jammed.

despite this, the possibility that the crash might not have been an accident was dismissed without explanation: "It is considered that there is no question of sabotage involved in the crash of Liberator AL523." This report was signed by the President and members of the Court (but not by the observers) on July 23, and countersigned by Air Commodore Simpson on the following day. On July 25, the President of the Court, Group Captain Elton, left Gibraltar and flew back to England, bearing this report with him. The other officers of the Court followed a week later.[45]

In the meantime, the Air Ministry's Inspector of Accidents had privately had first look at each of the three major Liberator aircraft sections as they were landed at the naval dockyard, and this officer, Flight Lieutenant John Buck, had found no technical evidence to support the pilot's story at all. In particular, he had found no evidence of jamming in the elevators and rudders; any damage he had seen was consistent with the crash impact or subsequent salvage operations. He particularly examined the elevator and rudder control surfaces and hinge-lines for any signs that some "external body" might have jammed them: "there was no evidence of this having occurred." He had next examined the entire operating mechanism of the control surfaces, but again had found no defect apart from damage obviously caused by crash or salvage. For example, the cables linking the control columns in the cockpit to the mechanism in the tail had naturally snapped when the aircraft broke up.

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At the cockpit end of this control system, he had found both the sprocket chains broken at the link where they normally joined the control cables: "this was due to the impact of the crash." The chains themselves were in good condition and there were no signs of overriding or jamming in any of the links. The sprockets by which the control columns actuated the chains were subjected to the same detailed scrutiny, tooth by tooth: again there was no damage to them whatever. In short, Flight Lieutenant Buck stated, "A complete examination of the control system showed no signs of any jamming previous to the crash."[46]

This expert finding was so explicit as to throw the whole conclusions of the Gibraltar Inquiry, at which Flight Lieutenant Buck had not been called as a witness, into suspicion. The Liberator's pilot had alleged that his controls had become rigidly locked and had volunteered the theory that the locking-mechanism had been accidentally operated; the theory had now been dismissed as unfounded, and on Flight Lieutenant Buck's investigation it seemed that there was no evidence that jamming had occurred at all. To each effect, there must somewhere be a cause; Buck had shown that there was no *cause*, so the existence of the *effect* Prchal claimed to have experienced must logically be questioned as well. On Air Marshal Slessor's instructions, the Court of Inquiry was reconvened on August 3, at Coastal Command's country house headquarters in Middlesex, and Flight Lieutenant Prchal was recalled to testify.[47]

This time he was given a very much rougher ride by the Court's officers. The Deputy Chief of the Accident Investigation Branch, Group Captain P. G. Tweedie, was present as a total of thirty-four questions was put to Prchal on August 5.[48] Many of the questions were designed to check his earlier statements. This time the Court was trying to catch the officer out, and a number of dummy questions were put in, evidently designed to puzzle him with their significance: What type was this Liberator's automatic pilot? Does the Liberator Mark II's speed increase appreciably when its undercarriage is raised? How was his cockpit lighted? Some of these ques-

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tions bore vaguely on the crash as he had described, but most of them did not.

Edward Prchal emerged from this gruelling examination very favourably; but even though the Court failed to break down his quiet assertion that his controls had jammed, a rather puzzling picture emerged, both in detail and in outline.

initially the Court focused on Prchal's theory that the locking lever had somehow been actuated on take-off. The lever concerned projected horizontally out of the control pedestal between the pilot and the co-pilot. When the control surfaces were all in the neutral ("locking") position, this lever could be pulled upwards against a spring to lock the controls by a rack-and-pinion mechanism as already described. The locking lever was then held up in the "locked" position by means of a loose strap, hooked over the lever and a convenient nut on the pedestal. Part of the pilot's discipline was to ensure that not only was the strap removed and the lever released prior to take-off, but to see that the strap could be seen to be removed. The Liberator pilot's regulations specified that after its removal, "The strap is stowed securely in the overhead."[49]

The first question put to Prchal in England was, "When you entered Liberator AL523 . . . were the controls locked?"

Prchal answered, "Yes."

"How were they locked?"

"By the locking strap, one end of which held the locking control lever up, and the other end . . . being hooked over the throttle friction nut."

He was asked whether the controls were still locked as the Liberator taxied out to take-off: they should have been, and Prchal replied that they were.

The Court continued, "Who unlocked the controls when you stopped to carry out your cockpit drill at the end of the runway?"

Prchal answered that his second pilot, Squadron Leader Herring, had done this on his instructions (which incidentally showed that Herring knew which lever was the control locking lever and disposed of the theory Prchal himself had voiced when in hospital in

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Gibraltar[50]). Describing in detail his cockpit drill on the runway, Prchal added that after Herring had unlocked the flying controls he (Prchal) had tested elevators, ailerons and rudders for complete freedom of movement to the limit of their range: "They were completely free."

The Court pressed him, "Did you *see* the second pilot release the flying controls locking-lever strap?"

Prchal nodded: "Yes."

He was asked to describe *how* Herring had released the strap; Prchal described how Herring had slipped the strap off the friction nut, and he had then seen the locking-lever spring right down into the unlocked position.

"What happened to the strap?"

Flight Lieutenant Prchal replied: "I don't know in this instance. Generally it is left lying on the floor."

the court tried to approach him on another tack. We have already commented on Prchal's statement that visibility was so good when he took off that he could see the horizon clearly even though it was a moonless night and he was facing east. It should also be noted here that Liberators, like all heavy aircraft, were essentially instrument aircraft and that attempts at visual take-offs, especially by night, were strongly discouraged. On this point the official pilot training manual reads: "If you set the artificial horizon properly before take-off, with the miniature airplane slightly below the horizon bar, you can hold the proper angle of climb after leaving the runway by keeping the miniature airplane approximately 1/8–inch above the horizon bar. *Establish and hold proper attitudes in the B-24 [Liberator] by reference to flight instruments rather than to outside objects. It's an instrument plane.*"[51]

Again the dummy questions came first.

"Was the Aldis lamp used for signalling before take-off?"

"No."

"Where was it stowed?"

"In the navigator's compartment."

"How did you get permission to take off?"

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"By a green light from the Airfield Controller."

Then the Court asked Prchal how he had steered the Liberator down the runway during its take-off run. Prchal told them he had used the engines first, then as the aircraft built up speed the rudders. This established that the rudder controls were apparently not locked at this time. "Can you state how much rudder you used?" Prchal replied: "A very slight amount."

The Court reminded him that on July 8 he had stated that all the controls were definitely functioning correctly when the aircraft became airborne: "Why are you so certain of this?"

Prchal replied: "I had to pull the aircraft off the runway by a considerable movement of the control column backwards." As for the other controls he was convinced he would have known if they had not been free.

Did he take off by instruments, he was asked.

"No," he admitted, "because there was good visibility and a good horizon, but I glanced at my airspeed indicator and altimeter from time to time."

This was Prchal's first explicit claim to have taken off visually on the night of the crash, but again his "good horizon" statement passed unchallenged. The court was chasing another hare: "Why did you not feel for the control locking-lever if you thought the controls were locked?"

Prchal replied, "Because if I had bent down to do that, I would not have been able to see the horizon" (though it may seem strange that he was concerned about the horizon once he had discovered that his elevator controls were not responding). This explanation was apparently accepted, for no further questions in this direction were asked.

it proved impossible to shake the Flight Lieutenant. The Court asked him if he knew the maximum permissible speed for a Liberator Mark II flying with its flaps down. Prchal replied, "155 m.p.h. with flaps fully down."[52]

The Court's President reminded him that he had previously stated that his speed had built up to 165 miles per hour. "Why did you do

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this?" Prchal answered to the effect that normally he would have increased only to 155 m.p.h. but this time, crashing out of control into the sea, he had unavoidably exceeded this figure. This reply, it was subsequently found, had conceded too much; when Prchal's new Flight Commander was called to testify to the Court of Inquiry about two hours later, he informed its officers that the flight limitation that flaps should not be down at speeds exceeding 155 m.p.h. applied to full flaps only: "I have often exceeded the figure with half flaps on when making a circuit prior to coming in to land. *When taking off with a heavy load*, I always build up my speed to at least 165 m.p.h. before taking off any flap."[53]

The next point put to Prchal was not so lightly disposed of: from a signal from the Middle East giving the disposal of the cargo as loaded at Cairo, the Court now knew that, in the opinion of Liberator expert Squadron Leader Sach, Prchal's aircraft had apparently been badly loaded, and would have been tail-heavy; yet Prchal had earlier testified that he was satisfied with the load's disposal.[54] "Why were you satisfied?" the Court now asked him.

Prchal answered this one at length: "Firstly, because I had flown Liberator AL523 from Cairo and the load was the same from Gibraltar with the exception that one additional passenger and his luggage was in the bomb bay, and this additional load made no difference because it was near the centre of gravity of the aircraft; and secondly, [because] when taxying the aircraft was well balanced on its main wheels. If there is too much load in the nose she tends to ride on her nose-wheel, and if there is too much load aft she tends to drop her tail."

No point of the Inquiry exposes the tepid attitude of the Court more than in its acceptance of the statement by Prchal, "the load was the same from Gibraltar with the exception that one additional passenger and his luggage was in the bomb bay." The extent to which the aircraft was heavier on its departure from Gibraltar than on its arrival will be dealt with more fully later. Prchal's belief that his load was only heavier by about three hundred pounds indicates that the true situation had not been disclosed to him. It is astonishing that

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the Court did not investigate certain items which could have showed substantial differences in the total load.[55]

After one more technical question – how Prchal could be sure that his controls were locked during the taxying phase of the take-off – the Court asked three final questions on what seemed a purely routine matter. It had not escaped their attention that (apart from Cazalet) none of Prchal's crew and passengers had been wearing Mae Wests or parachute harness: this was definitely Prchal's responsibility.

"What action did you take on this occasion to satisfy yourself that the occupants of Liberator AL523 were wearing their Mae Wests?"

"None."

"Who provides Mae Wests and parachutes for the passengers and instructs them in their use?"

"The Air Despatch and Reception Unit."

Then again, in the closing seconds of his interrogation, a fresh mystery was revealed, a mystery which was to haunt all subsequent investigations into the Sikorski crash. Group Captain Elton addressed Prchal:

"Were you wearing a Mae West on this occasion?"

And Edward Prchal replied: "No."

He added, "I had my Mae West behind my back where I normally carry it." (Presumably this meant on the back of his seat.)

This flat denial caused a buzz of speculation in the higher levels of the Gibraltar colony's officers when the news reached them. The Court had not followed the matter up at all. Governor Macfarlane wrote, "Many of us on the Rock indulged in a great deal of thought and speculation regarding how such an inexplicable crash should have occurred," and he was one of those most puzzled by Prchal's denial.[56]

In his 1945 record of this episode, Mason-Macfarlane wrote: "He [the pilot] stoutly maintained in evidence that he had not departed from his usual practice and that when he started his take-off run he was not wearing his Mae West. The fact remains that when he was

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picked up out of the water, he was found to be not only wearing his Mae West but every tape and fastening had been properly put on and done up."[57]

Word of the speculations about him must have reached the Czech R.A.F. officer soon after, and he modified his story yet again. By the time it was published in the Polish newspaper in London in 1953, he had a vague explanation of the Mae West as well: "I heard later that I was desperately clutching my Mae West with my left hand, and this kept me afloat and saved my life . . . I was operated on immediately after my transfer to hospital, still unconscious. I regained consciousness on the fourth day."[58] Whoever told him he was picked up "clutching" his Mae West had obviously not been in the dinghy on that night.[59] It must have seemed remarkable that Prchal could have been thrown out through the Perspex canopy, as he said, and still clutched grimly to his Mae West, though unconscious; small wonder that the local medical officers regarded this case with great interest.

Later on the day that Edward Prchal's cross-examination was finished, the Air Ministry's Accident Inspector, Flight Lieutenant Buck, was called, by special arrangement with his Ministry, and he reported exactly what his technical investigation of the wreckage had shown: namely that there was no evidence that any jamming of the controls had occurred, or that the locking mechanism had been engaged at the moment of impact. On this latter score he was asked what he would have expected to find if the locking mechanism *had* been engaged. Buck (like Stevens before him) replied, "Signs of shearing or bending of the locking pins."

The Court asked him, "Have you ever heard of a case in which a Liberator attempted to take off or took off with the flying controls locked?" (An allusion to Prchal's alleged experience with Squadron Leader McPhail.)

Buck replied, "Yes – in one case where a Liberator attempted to take off with locked controls, but never left the ground." And the slightly built Air Ministry official dryly continued: "The aircraft ran

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the full length of the aerodrome and crashed into a hangar at high speed."[60]

After him, R.A.E. Farnborough's chief test pilot, Squadron Leader Roland Falk, was called and questioned at some length on whether a Liberator, all-up weight 54,600 pounds, could by some quirk take off if all its flying controls were locked. Falk replied that this would occur only at about 180 miles per hour, or if the load was disposed so far aft that once airborne the aircraft would stall and crash at once: "In my opinion this is not a practical possibility." The only other item of interest was that, according to Falk's evidence, it was possible for a pilot to determine whether his aircraft's load was dangerously disposed while taxying. Falk also revealed that there was an altimeter position correction error of minus 33 feet at take-off speeds[61]; but the Court subsequently learned that Prchal was well aware of this.[62]

His new Flight Commander, Flight Lieutenant Wallace Watson, informed the Court that as Prchal's former instructor on Liberators he considered him the best of the fifty pilots or more he had converted to that aircraft.[63] Watson was the last witness to be called. After hearing and rehearing over thirty witnesses, the Court admitted that it was no nearer to establishing the truth. Its three members went to R.A.F. Lyneham, together with the Polish Major S. Dudzinski, his fellow observer Wing Commander Russell, and a squadron leader from the R.A.F.'s Liberator Conversion Unit at Beaulieu to explore one last theory – that the flying controls had become jammed by the raising of the nose-wheel into the floor beneath the cockpit of the Liberator. A virtually identical Liberator was jacked up off the ground and exhaustive tests conducted; the conclusion was that, like all the other theories, "this could not be considered as a possible cause of the accident."

Despite the complete absence of any explanation as to how the jamming of the elevator controls had occurred, this was given in the Air Ministry communiqué as the reason for the crash of Liberator AL523. The Court considered that "Flight Lieutenant Prchal was in no way to blame."[64]

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part three
THE UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

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7: The Unmentioned Issue

So Prchal was in no way to blame. The officer commanding Coastal Command, Air Marshal Sir John Slessor, reviewed all the evidence during the second week in August 1943 and reported to the Air Ministry on the 11th that regrettably the Court's decision seemed the only one possible, namely that there was no way of explaining why the Liberator aircraft's controls had jammed. Slessor also agreed that "no blame can attach to Flight Lieutenant Prchal for this accident."[1]

There seemed no reason to suspect any sort of foul play, particularly in view of the heavy security guard at Gibraltar. As for the airman's having been able to remove mailbags unobserved by the Army sentry, Slessor recommended that this should be the subject of disciplinary action; it seems right that no further importance should attach to this military laxity in view of the Air Force's own unusually effective security precautions on this particular aircraft.

There the matter might well have rested. As Mr Edward Prchal now states, he personally was "quite content" with the findings of the Court of Inquiry.[2] The Air Ministry drafted an official communiqué as Sir Archibald Sinclair had promised to the House of Commons the month before, and on September 1, this was transmitted by the Foreign Office to the London ambassador of the Polish exile government, Count Raczynski, together with photographic

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copies of the Air Ministry's reports on the Court of Inquiry.[3] The Polish Government was asked whether it concurred with the text of the proposed communiqué:

> The Air Ministry announces:
>
> The Report of the Court of Inquiry which has been investigating the cause of the Liberator accident at Gibraltar on July 4, 1943, in which General Sikorski lost his life, has now been received.
>
> The findings of the Court and the observations of the officers whose duty it is to review and comment on those findings have been considered and it is apparent that the accident was due to jamming of the elevator controls shortly after take-off with the result that the aircraft became uncontrollable.
>
> After most careful examination of all the available evidence, including that of the pilot, it has not been possible to determine how the jamming occurred but it has been established that there was no sabotage.
>
> It is also clear that the captain of the aircraft, who is a pilot of great experience and exceptional ability, was in no way to blame.
>
> An officer of the Polish Air Force attended throughout the proceedings.[4]

if the reason why Major Dudzinski, the Polish Air Force officer, had been invited to observe the Inquiry was now obvious to the Poles, what really dismayed them was the penultimate paragraph, full of praise for Prchal. For this they could see no reason. The Poles argued further that it was illogical to state that there had been no sabotage, if it had not been possible to determine how the elevator controls had become jammed. Their suspicions were aroused all over again, and the Sikorski crash affair plunged still deeper into the depths of dispute.

On September 3, the Polish Council of Ministers rejected the communiqué, protesting that it showed a tendency to pure polemics on the German insinuations (i.e., of sabotage), without showing real basis for rejecting the sabotage thesis.[5] The Court of Inquiry's conclusion that the Gibraltar security precautions appeared to have

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been comprehensive and thorough was rejected as "particularly weak."[6] The Polish Air Force Inspectorate-General was directly to study all the papers and give the Council of Ministers an independent opinion, and to send copies of this and the papers concerned to the Ministry of Justice in St. James-street, in which were gathered the best legal brains of the Polish government-in-exile.

This and all the subsequent Polish investigations were to suffer the same shortcoming: unable to cross-examine the R.A.F. Court's witnesses, or even to take fresh evidence from them, the Polish investigations were conducted in a vacuum into which fresh evidence could be injected only by those Poles who had been in Gibraltar at the time.

A detailed report on the whole affair had already been filed by Lieutenant Lubienski, written within only days of the crash. Now Major Dudzinski and Mr Tadeusz Ullmann were directed to report as well; but their additional evidence was precious little on which to found a fresh inquiry.

It was a tragedy within a tragedy that the Poles should have felt so suspicious, and yet been so impotent. A whole series of unanswered questions left wide open the possibility of foul play. The Polish position was a difficult one: they were guests in London; the Polish Air Force was accredited to the R.A.F. and solely dependent on it for its continued existence and support. Moreover, only five months before they had had the temerity to accuse one of their host's allies of murder on the largest scale; how could they now even dare include their host in a list of suspects of the Polish Prime Minister's murder?[7] The thought was unthinkable; the thought was not thought.

Major Dudzinski filed a three-page report listing in formal prose the events of his stay on the Rock.[8] He had noted that Prchal had been picked up wearing his life-jacket fully inflated, and that none of the other bodies had had their Mae Wests on. He evidently missed the pilot's later denial, or failed to attach any importance to it.

It was left to Tadeusz Ullmann, the shy, self-effacing civil servant from the Polish Ministry of the Interior, to give halting voice to his suspicions on reading through the British papers. So many points

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had been left unexplained, he pointed out: how many people were in the Liberator as it crashed, and what were their real identities? How had the plane come to lose a mailbag? Had the Court's officers really experimented with an identical Liberator to see if its elevator controls could be locked in flight? Why was there no explanation of the pilot's having been the only one [except Cazalet] to wear a Mae West, and why had he subsequently denied this?

Nor was that all, for Ullmann – who had been at Gibraltar throughout the inquiry – pointed out that it had lasted nearly a month; yet its ostensibly verbatim proceedings had apparently been condensed into twenty-three pages of typescript; in short, how could they be sure that the copy supplied by the British had not been doctored or cut?[9]

Copies of these commentaries by Dudzinski and Ullmann were forwarded to the Polish Attorney General and he was asked whether he could express any opinion as to how the crash had been caused, as soon as all their own inquiries were complete.[10]

A Polish Air Force commission of inquiry was at once established to consider the inconsistencies in the British report; the Air Ministry was pressing the Poles urgently for a decision, as they wanted to release their communiqué.[11] The commission held its first and only session on the morning of September 11 at the Rubens Hotel, which was the Polish General Staff's headquarters in Buckingham Palace Road. Their report was sent up to the Polish Council of Ministers three days later: they stressed that Flight Lieutenant Prchal's allegation that his controls had jammed could not be verified, and gave as the somewhat surprising (and certainly inaccurate) reason for this that some parts of the aircraft necessary for such a verification had not been found. It appears that Dudzinski and other Poles in Gibraltar had been told this by the British authorities.[12]

Only on two matters was the Polish commission's report of positive interest. Examining the fact that Prchal alone was wearing his life-jacket at the time of the crash, the commission agreed that this might suggest that he had deliberately "staged" an accident: "this must be considered highly improbable and without substance." As for the British draft communiqué, the Poles recommended that any

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such communiqué should be short and more cautiously formulated as to the reason for the accident. The glowing opinion expressed about Prchal was "quite unnecessary," they felt.

They redrafted the communiqué along lines very similar to the British version, except for two amendments. Where the Air Ministry had declared that it was apparent that the accident had been caused by the elevator controls jamming after take-off, the Poles suggested that this should be given as the cause "according to the pilot's statements."[13] And while the Air Ministry had wanted to state that "it has been established that there was no sabotage," the Poles thought it better if it were declared that "it has not been established that there was sabotage" – a more supportable statement in view of the admitted absence of evidence as to what had caused the accident.

If these Polish suggestions were communicated to the Air Ministry, all were ignored, and the official British communiqué was published on September 21, 1943, with the same reassurances about the absence of sabotage, and its testimonial to Prchal's capabilities.[14] *The Times* commented: "The name of the pilot, who was the only survivor, has not been disclosed by the Air Ministry." (In fact Prchal's name and full career had long been disclosed by the newspapers in America.)

(ii)

The Poles continued to dispute the findings of the Air Ministry Court of Inquiry until early in 1944, and the reader who has followed its proceedings in detail will feel constrained to sympathise with them. But then the Poles knew something of which the British Court's officers had been rightly ignorant, and this clearly nourished their suspicions at this stage.

So long as there was the possibility that papers on the case might be communicated, however indirectly, to the British, the Poles in London had kept an embarrassed silence on one issue. But at the end of the summer of 1943, with the publication of the Air Ministry communiqué, this changed: they learned that the British consid-

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ered the case closed and were inquiring into it no further. Now the Poles renewed their own investigations, satisfied that they were so to speak *in camera*.[15] And now the issue was mentioned for the first time in the secret correspondence between the departments of the Polish Government in London: the fatal crash at Gibraltar was not the first incident with British aircraft in which General Sikorski had been involved.

Three lawyers of the Polish Ministry of Justice were charged with secretly reviewing all the evidence of both the British and Polish inquiries, and early in October they advised their Minister that insofar as sabotage could not, on the evidence, be ruled out, the British communiqué *had* been too categorical.[16] Their first recommendation was that the American manufacturers of Liberator bombers should be asked whether any other instances of elevator controls jamming had ever come to their notice. And their second recommendation was that the other aircraft incidents involving General Sikorski should now be re-examined, in the light of the final, fatal one.

With cautious legal mind they admitted that even an investigation of the earlier incidents would not throw light on the *cause* of the Gibraltar crash; but one thing was certain – that if these extended investigations should prove there to have been foul play on the earlier occasions, there was the greater probability that foul play had caused the Gibraltar crash as well. One can imagine the gasp of relief from the Polish Ministers in London now that this statement was off their chests. On October 18, the Minister of Justice wrote to the new Prime Minister of Poland, Mr Mikolajczyk, recommending an investigation of the defects in the other aircraft in which General Sikorski had travelled, especially the case at Montreal.[17]

In America, these previous incidents had aroused considerable suspicion among those few diplomats who learned of them, and one of them in particular, Mr Sumner Welles, subsequently gave them as his reason for believing the Gibraltar crash to be no accident, In Congressional Hearings after the war, the then Under-Secretary of State was asked to explain an earlier reference to the "assassination of General Sikorski." Welles replied: "I have always

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believed that there was sabotage. You will remember, Mr Chairman, that he was brought down in the plane just as he was taking off from Gibraltar. The plane crashed. I remember that when General Sikorski came to the United States the year before, his plane, in taking off from Montreal, had crashed when it was only about 100 feet above the ground." To put it mildly, Welles concluded, it would seem an odd "coincidence." He thought the Russians lurked somewhere behind all this.[18]

Before proceeding to an examination of the strange Montreal affair, there is a still earlier, and perhaps even odder, incident to be mentioned. In March 1942, General Sikorski was invited to America for his second conference with President Roosevelt, and it was on the outbound flight that this singular incident occurred.

General Sikorski had taken off at 2.30 A.M. on March 21, after being delayed for five days by bad weather; his Liberator aircraft had left Prestwick en route for Canada, where it was to make its first stop. In the General's party were various Ministers, Colonel Leon Mitkiewicz (the deputy Chief of the Polish General Staff) and the new Polish air attaché going out to Washington, a Wing Commander who had just completed a tour of operations in Bomber Command. In fact he had had the gruelling experience of being shot down over the English Channel earlier in the year; he plied his fellow passengers with advice on how to rescue themselves if the aircraft crashed into the sea, but he only succeeded in alarming them.[19]

As the aircraft climbed to about 30,000 feet and the hours passed, the few passengers tried to adopt comfortable positions, a near impossibility in their bulky flying suits, life-jackets, parachute harness and oxygen masks. Sikorski and Mitkiewicz were close to each other, sitting uncomfortably, and the Wing Commander lay in the well of the fuselage, apparently asleep, on the mattresses they had spread out soon after take-off.

About five hours out over the Atlantic, two or three of the passengers smelled burning rubber, and soon afterwards Mitkiewicz and another passenger, the Reverend Kaczynski, were puzzled to see

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the new air attaché climb past them, holding his hand in his pocket and with an unusual look on his face.[20]

The Colonel assumed that he was feeling unwell, for he disappeared into the lavatory area in the aircraft's tail. Dr Jozef Retinger, who was also among the passengers and was already mildly irritated with the Wing Commander over another matter, "mentally noted" that the officer stayed closeted in the aircraft's tail for an unduly long time; he knew that this upset the aircraft's trim and would reduce its speed. But after about three-quarters of an hour, the Wing Commander reappeared, looking "somewhat better" in Mitkiewicz's words.

It was not air sickness, however, which had been troubling the new air attaché: according to his later statement to the G-2 (Military Intelligence) authorities in Washington, he had been lying on the Liberator's floor, when he too had smelt the strong odour of burning rubber. "In fear that there was a short circuit in the electrical installations, I started to search for the fire underneath the mattresses. As I slipped my hand underneath one of the mattresses, I felt great heat and pulled out a greatly heated incendiary candle at the end of which there was a cap wound with a black tape."[21]

He had snapped the wire connecting the cap to the "bomb" and deposited the cap in the lavatory, where it would be furthest from the Liberator's fuel tanks; he had retained the now apparently harmless bomb section, ready to jettison it at once if it should become live. Finally, he had returned to his seat, telling nobody about the incident, in order not to alarm them, as he said. That was his story as told to the Americans, but in fact two hours after leaving the lavatory he showed the bomb, in a chamois leather bag, to Dr Retinger; and Dr Retinger had instructed him to mention the find to nobody until the plane reached Canada.[22]

The aircraft had landed at Montreal airfield during the afternoon. The Wing Commander was in some uncertainty as to whether to show the device to the British authorities there or to wait until the plane reached American soil. That evening, he telephoned Colonel Mitkiewicz and arranged to call on him at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. He took the bomb with him – it was a shiny black box about five

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inches long – wrapped in newspaper. He unwrapped it in the privacy of Mitkiewicz's room and showed it to him. He explained to the Colonel that he had seen these before, when he was in the R.A.F., in Bomber Command. They were the demolition devices used to enable crews to destroy their aircraft if forced down in enemy territory. This did nothing to explain why the bomb had apparently become active after five hours of flight, however; had the detonation process reached completion, it seemed that the aircraft would have been an inferno within seconds, over the very middle of the Atlantic.

Colonel Mitkiewicz was shocked by this revelation. He ordered the Wing Commander to keep the whole affair a close secret until they reached Washington. Then, despite the early hour, he telephoned Colonel Protasewicz, an engineer officer who had also flown in the plane with them, and handed the contrivance to him. Protasewicz confirmed that it seemed to be a small but powerful incendiary bomb. He commented, "Well, that was a fine way they wanted to finish us off. This was an attempt on General Sikorski's life."[23] It was decided that Sikorski – who was still unaware of the incident – should complete the rest of his American journey by train.[24]

On March 24, 1942, as soon as the Polish party reached Washington, the device was handed to the U.S. Army Department for laboratory and x-ray examination. The cap and wire which the Wing Commander said he had torn off and thrown into the lavatory of the Liberator were not recovered before the aircraft was cleaned out.

Four days later, Mitkiewicz had the U.S. experts' report: the device was an "incendiary bomb" of considerable power, operated either by a mechanical plunger or, after a small delay, by a standby system (presumably the one disconnected by the officer). The report stated: "It was not possible to so specify the origin of the mechanism from the different parts but it is an item of mass production." Unofficially, according to Mitkiewicz, the G-2 experts told the Poles that the device was of British origin and used by the R.A.F., as the Wing Commander had himself stated.[25]

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When the time for the return flight came, the British and Canadian authorities, informed by now of the affair, carried out the most stringent security procedures. The R.C.A.F. liaison officer to R.A.F. Ferry Command was called to the Commander-in-Chief's office at Dorval airfield, Montreal, and informed by Air Commodore Marix that "an attack had been made on the life of General Sikorski." Marix complained that the Poles had been very "remiss" in concealing the episode from the Canadians and in telling the American G-2 instead. In any event, special security precautions were to be taken: special guards were posted on the plane for the return flight at Dorval, all freight was removed from the plane and replaced with diplomatic bags. There were further special precautions during the stopover at Gander and the flight back to Scotland. Even so, a small electrical fire broke out in the aircraft's cockpit over mid-Atlantic, which the crew however thought unremarkable.[26] General Sikorski landed safely back in Scotland on April 6.

Colonel Mitkiewicz begged him not to make any further journeys by air, as his life was too precious for the future of Poland. Sikorski replied that he was convinced that he would perish sooner or later on one of these flights – it was his destiny. Turning to the circle of friends and colleagues who had gathered to greet him – his wife, his only daughter, Chief of Staff Klimecki and many others – he added that he only hoped that he would not be killed before his mission in this war was accomplished, and all of them might return to a free and independent Poland. It was probably with these entreaties in mind that General Sikorski, addressing Polish troops in Scotland at this time, referred to the dangers inherent in his many flights, and added that he now understood with what devotion Poland's airmen had "covered the name of Poland with glory," while serving in the R.A.F.[27]

All the more remarkable was the sequel to the affair. The American x-rays and report had been passed by the British Intelligence authorities to the War Office in London, and their technical experts examined the device and reported in detail on it on May 28, 1942: they pointed out that this was a standard British sabotage device,

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but normally it had no "attachment" of the type described by the Wing Commander; nor had this device "fired" either wholly or partially. If it had, it would have been completely destroyed. It was fitted with a 30–minute delayed-action device which had not been triggered. It was designed to burn for 50 seconds with intense heat, and it was suitable for attacking "self-destroying" (i.e., readily-flammable) targets. Its case was made of black celluloid.

The War Office experts concluded:

"From the evidence and a careful examination of the case, we can only proffer two possible solutions:

(a) the story is a phoney;

(b) somebody thought the device could be fired electrically and had coupled it up with an electric circuit on the machine (you can presumably investigate to ascertain whether such a circuit was available) or had coupled it up with an electric battery – of the finding of which no comment is made in the report."[28]

To suggest that the story was "a phoney" was a very serious charge indeed. The Polish Wing Commander had already been subjected to a severe cross-examination by officers of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in New York.[29] On May 21, two officers of the British Intelligence services questioned Colonel Mitkiewicz and Colonel Protasewicz about the whole episode, which had still been kept the closest secret; it was obvious to the two Poles that the Wing Commander's account of events was not believed. Those who knew the Air Force officer, and in particular Dr Retinger, were most indignant about this: "The Wing Commander has an excellent flying record," he protested on June 1, "and is regarded as one of the Polish air aces. I make a point of this, because I have heard that it has been suggested that the story of the attempt on the life of General Sikorski is a bogus one; but I do not wish to divulge the source of this information, although I admit it was from a British source and not from a Polish one."[30]

The Wing Commander was recalled to the British Isles none the less, and in Ayr he was closely grilled on June 26, by an officer of the security services. He stuck to his former statements. He described how he had found the object under his mattress after he had been

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awakened by the Liberator's flight engineer stepping over him and alarmed by the smell of burning rubber. Attached to the side of the object, he said, was a small round thing wrapped in "light coloured" tape, and fastened to the main black object by "a strip of adhesive tape." His immediate reaction had been that it was some kind of bomb: "I took the small thing to be a fuse, and I ripped it off in one movement." He had thrown the small attachment, which was very hot, into the lavatory, the only place where he could find some liquid. He said he had forgotten he had shown it to Retinger: "My recollection is that I did not want myself to say anything which might cause panic." On being told by the Washington experts that the object he had retained was an incendiary, he said it had occurred to him that he had seen small incendiaries like this when he had visited "a place in Scotland where Polish parachutists are trained in sabotage methods."[31] Alas for the poor Wing Commander: this gratuitous remark was to prove his undoing.

Upon his release, he travelled across to a hospital in Scotland for further treatment of an ailment which he suffered in consequence of his ditching in the Channel earlier in the year (he had apparently become addicted to morphine). Here he was privately kept under surveillance by British Intelligence officers, who reported that after he was released from hospital one week later he visited a certain second lieutenant in the Polish Engineers, who was in charge of a laboratory where research was conducted on camouflaged sabotage weapons, no less.[32] He had lengthy discussions with this officer before going down to London. According to a statement by the lieutenant later, the Air Force officer (who had visited him before) had met him on July 10 at the Caledonian Hotel, Leven, and discussed with him American parachutist ideas.

The investigating officers were waiting for the Wing Commander when he reached the station in London, and he was again questioned, while the lieutenant was being interrogated in Scotland. The Wing Commander adhered firmly to his original statement, and explained that he had merely wanted to see old friends whom he had not seen since his earlier convalescence from the Channel ditching.

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The interrogation of the second lieutenant produced more positive results, however. He finally broke down and made a full statement on July 18. This officer, Eugeniusz Jurewicz, was in charge of Largo House, a Fifeshire laboratory carrying out experiments on the construction of sabotage equipment, and training officers in the use of British sabotage devices. He stated that in December 1941, the Wing Commander had visited the laboratory, and he had demonstrated various grenades, "time pencils" and incendiaries to him. Shown the device claimed to have been found in the Liberator, Jurewicz recognised it at once: "We called it a 'cigar-holder-looking bomb.' " It was a delayed action incendiary similar to a time pencil, only much more powerful. Nor was that all: Jurewicz stated further that on his own initiative he had given the Wing Commander just such a bomb "as a souvenir."[33] He had said he wanted it to be able to destroy an aircraft, if ever he should be forced down in enemy territory.

The Wing Commander was confronted with the Polish lieutenant's statement soon after. Now he knew that there was no point in lying any further, and he made a complete and frank written confession, describing his visit to the research laboratory at Leven, his request to be shown the sabotage devices there, and his request to be given one. The English translation of his confession read in part: "I wanted the bomb to carry with me on our raids over occupied countries in order that I might use it to fire my plane if I got shot down, or use it to some other advantage if I had to land over there."[34] The whole episode had followed on from that point.

On the day after this confession was made, July 21, 1942, Mr Duff Cooper, who had recently taken over the chairmanship of the Security Executive, wrote at length to General Sikorski about the incident, explaining that the British security officers to whom the matter was referred had been convinced all along that the bomb had not been placed there by any enemy agent: "I am now able to inform your Excellency that Wing Commander K——, who claimed to have found the bomb, has finally confessed that it was in his possession when he went on board the plane. He had been given it some time before, as has been proved, and he kept it in his gas mask, according

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to his own statement, in order that if he were forced to make a landing in enemy territory he might use it either for the destruction of his plane or for some other purpose. He had forgotten that it was in his possession until he was alarmed by the smell of burning rubber, and he then thought that the bomb might be about to explode. He had therefore pretended to discover it on board the plane, having, as he himself admits, completely lost his head."

Duff Cooper continued that he had told Mr Churchill all the facts, and the latter had authorised him to write to Sikorski. His officials believed that the Wing Commander was now speaking the truth and never had any sinister motive, but having told one lie had found that he was compelled to go on lying. Despite this, Duff Cooper urged that no action should be taken against the officer, and recommended that he could be found valuable further employment either in Britain or the United States, where he was still air attaché. Sikorski was enjoined to tell as few people as possible the truth of the matter.[35]

This was more easily said than done, for by now rumours of an assassination attempt on General Sikorski had reached Poland itself, and grave unrest was becoming apparent in the ranks of the powerful Home Army there. General Klimecki, anxious to quell these rumours, delegated a senior courier about to be parachuted back into Poland to study all the documents on the case and report on the truth of the affair to General Grot (Stefan Rowecki), Commander-in-Chief of the Home Army. This officer, Colonel Iranek Osmecki, learned that the Wing Commander had made such a confession as was claimed, but had given only incoherent reasons for his action: it seemed obvious that the officer was suffering from some mental disorder. The case was considered closed by the British.

General Sikorski wrote to Duff Cooper some days later agreeing that the Wing Commander must have lost his head, but "while his gallant past militates in his favour I see myself obliged to continue investigations to clear entirely the matter." In the meantime the officer would be relieved of his post as air attaché and sent on a long leave "to recover his health."[36] The Wing Commander was placed under observation in a mental home in Scotland, but subsequently

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released. He was struck by a passing tram car and killed in Edinburgh some time later.[37]

(iii)

The Montreal crash was less easily explained. When the Minister of Justice informed the new Prime Minister, Mikolajczyk, in October 1943, that if renewed investigation of the Montreal crash should prove it to have been caused by sabotage, then sabotage would probably have caused the Gibraltar crash as well, the irony was that Mikolajczyk already knew the truth – for he had heard it from the pen of the late General Sikorski himself: it *was* caused by sabotage.

It had come about like this: at the end of November 1942, General Sikorski had begun his third and final visit to the United States; it was likely to prove his last visit for some time, for he now left London only with the greatest unwillingness. During the latter half of 1942, however, a growing burden had been placed on Poland's relations with the Allies in view of the Soviet Government's increasing demands on what had been until September 1939 Polish territory. Sikorski had arranged a meeting with President Roosevelt on November 30, and his journey was to be broken once again at Montreal. Despite all the earlier warnings, Sikorski intended to fly on from Montreal to Washington: he was physically a very tough man, but the rigours of the gruelling wartime train journey from Montreal to Washington on the previous occasion must have persuaded him on this occasion to fly.

They reached Montreal's Dorval airfield at about one P.M. on November 30. The Commander-in-Chief of R.A.F. Ferry Command, Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Bowhill, was waiting to greet the Polish leader, together with a number of local Polish and R.A.F. officers. Bowhill arranged for a somewhat smaller plane[38] for the latter part of the journey, a twin-engined Lockheed Hudson No. BW409; this was to be serviced and ready for take-off by 2.15 P.M. that afternoon, which was just as well as the flight would take nearly two hours and Sikorski was to see the President at five o'clock.[39]

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Sikorski's adjutant, Lieutenant Glowczynski, telephoned the Polish Ambassador in Washington, Count Jan Ciechanowski, and informed him that they were about to take off and would reach the U.S. capital at about four o'clock.[40]

The Hudson's engines were run up and tested by the pilot, Squadron Leader R. E. Marrow, and he pronounced it ready to take off. At this moment, evidently unexpected by the Poles, an R.A.F. Group Captain arrived and again tested the engines, running them for several minutes. All seemed to be in order, so at the appointed hour General Sikorski's party, which included Colonel Cazalet, Colonel Marecki, and Dr Retinger, embarked.

The pilot taxied the Hudson to the end of the runway and ran up both engines to maximum power with his parking brakes on; then he released the brakes and the plane began to roll down the runway. After about fifteen seconds, the aircraft lifted smoothly off the ground and the passengers settled back – only to sense a sudden spasm of fear as first one, then both engines began to cough and almost at once cut out altogether. The aircraft was only about thirty feet off the ground and travelling at over a hundred miles per hour. It was too late to bring the plane safely down on its landing wheels as they were nearly up to the airfield's perimeter, beyond which loomed two ditches and an embankment.

In this nightmare situation, the pilot's presence of mind did not desert him: he banked the aircraft into a turn of 40 degrees to port, where the outfield seemed less rough, and decided to make a forced landing. He raised the landing wheels and switched off the engine ignition and fuel supply. The Hudson thumped into the ground outside the perimeter, bounced sickeningly twice, slid for two hundred yards on its belly, and came to a halt about thirty yards from a deep trench and some mounds of earth and stones.

The pilot forced his way into the passenger cabin and shouted to everybody to get out, because of the danger of fire. The airport's fire-brigade was already racing up to them, sirens howling; police and air force officers were racing over the field to them, and ahead of them all came a car with Air Chief Marshal Bowhill. Sikorski

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climbed out of the plane, badly shaken but unhurt – he managed to brace himself against the forward bulkhead just in time.

The plane was seriously damaged, and so badly crushed in parts that several pieces of the passengers' luggage had been flattened. But that was all. Thanks to the pilot's considerable skill, a terrible tragedy had been averted. From his account of the crash, it was obvious that the fuel supply had somehow been cut off as the plane left the ground. To the Poles it seemed that only the unexpected second testing of the engines by the Group Captain, just before take-off, had moved the time of this engine failure to an instant when the plane was still only a little way off the ground. Sikorski's adjutant collected statements from everybody in the aircraft, and wrote a detailed report on the incident at once. In the next few days R.A.F. Ferry Command began an immediate investigation into how such a strange accident could have occurred.

All the passengers returned to the airport buildings. While Sikorski's adjutant asked for a telephone line to Washington, Colonel Marecki telegraphed the startling news to the Chief of the Polish General Staff in London, General Klimecki: "We have arrived in Montreal, whence we took off immediately for Washington where the meeting with the President was arranged for this afternoon. The plane crashed on take-off. Everybody safe and sound. We are flying onwards on Tuesday morning [December 1, 1942]."[41]

The adjutant reached the Ambassador on the telephone at about 4.30 P.M., and informed him that Sikorski was in Montreal and wanted to speak to him. Ciechanowski expressed his dismay that the Prime Minister was still in Montreal, as in thirty minutes he had an appointment with Roosevelt in Washington; Sikorski was understandably irritated at his Ambassador's attitude, and informed him that he was lucky to be speaking to him at all, as he had nearly been killed along with all his party in an air crash. The Ambassador was somewhat subdued in his reproaches after that.[42] He asked Sikorski whether he thought it was an accident that both engines had cut out, and the Polish Prime Minister replied that an investigation had already begun, and he would prefer not to say.[43]

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An American bomber, a Liberator, was sent up to Montreal to collect him and his party, and he reached Washington early on December 1. On the following day he lunched at one P.M. with President Roosevelt, Sumner Welles and Ambassador Ciechanowski at the White House.[44] During this lunch, the President asked anxiously about the air accident he had heard about at Montreal. The General evaded making any direct reply, and said that it had only been an "accident after all" (although from later documents we know that this was not what he truly believed).

Roosevelt thereupon turned to Sumner Welles and asked him whether any news had yet reached him about the cause of the crash. Welles replied that the experts were of the opinion that there had been "foul play." The American President complimented Sikorski that Providence was clearly watching over him, which was a good thing: "We all need you so much."[45] Ciechanowski later related that as he glanced at the General, he saw a look of anxiety darkening his handsome, but wearied, face; and he recalled that this was "Sikorski's third accident since war broke out." Not without reason, he suspected that he was seeing his Prime Minister for the last time.

general sikorski deliberately played down the news of the crash. There was no mention whatsoever of it in the world's newspapers – not even in the local Montreal press – and all mention of it was forbidden.[46] Soon after, it appeared that the British were anxious to play it down as well, though possibly not for the same reasons as Sikorski, who was apprehensive as ever about what the Poles left in Poland would think if it became known there had been a real sabotage of an aircraft in which he was travelling.

In fact, the British tried to persuade General Sikorski that there had been no crash at all: Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Bowhill wrote to Sikorski (through the Air Ministry in London) to the effect that the plane's engines had *not* "cut out," or even coughed; that the pilot could have flown on if he had wanted to, but had nevertheless quite properly decided on a forced landing because of the loss of power. The plane had landed successfully, slightly touching the ground 200 yards from the end of the runway and finally coming to

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rest 400 yards later. The plane had not been seriously damaged and would soon be back in service. "Nothing at all," Sikorski was told by the British, "points to sabotage." Bowhill himself believed that ice had got into the carburettor, but his chief engineering officer believed there had been a sparking plug failure. As if this was not enough, Bowhill told the Poles that their pilot had been an experienced American civil airlines pilot, Captain H. J. Bowen, while Sikorski's adjutant, a most meticulous officer, had quite clearly recorded the man's name as Squadron Leader R. E. Marrow, of the R.A.F.[47]

A few weeks later, Bowhill's findings were evidently reversed, but before proceeding to examine this, there is one final incident to describe. At the end of General Sikorski's highly successful stay in the United States, he flew from Montreal to Gander, in Newfoundland, on January 12, in a British Liberator No. AL529, piloted by Captain Allen. He landed at Gander with all his party at about 6.15 P.M. local time, and was told by Group Captain Anderson, his host there, that his take-off for the Transatlantic crossing had been set at 9.30 P.M. As that time approached, however, Sikorski was informed that an "engine defect" had been detected in the Liberator, so serious as to necessitate its being taken out of service; he would have to wait for an aircraft to replace it. The new plane, Liberator AL528, arrived towards midnight, and a quarter of an hour past that hour his party's flight home finally began.[48] Truly it can be said of Sikorski, that everywhere he flew, ill luck dogged his path.

Some weeks later, General Sikorski learned, possibly in a conversation with Sir Louis Greig, private secretary to the Secretary of State for Air, that the British now agreed with the American view that the Montreal crash had been caused by sabotage, and it was their view that the Germans were to blame.[49] General Sikorski despatched a telegram to his deputy, Mikolajczyk, placing this on record:

> The American authorities, and later the British authorities, submitted a theory of German sabotage in regard to the Montreal air accident we know about. Investigations conducted have revealed evidence of this. Please tell [Information] Minister Stronski to

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> keep the news of this accident a close secret. I equally did not allow it to be leaked out in a sensational manner in the United States. This attitude, besides being desirable for the prosecution of further investigations, will also win us Great Britain's sympathy.[50]

this message, which was filed by Mikolajczyk's office on May 7, 1943, was a most moving testimony to Sikorski's faith in Britain's good intentions towards Poland; yet if he had paused to consider it, from a distance, so to speak, the manner in which the British had implicitly encouraged the Poles to hush the accident up was, inconsistent with the suggestion they now made that the crash was the result of German sabotage. If ever the British Government needed to be able to broadcast to the world that the Germans had nearly assassinated the Prime Minister of the Polish Government in exile, it was in the spring of 1943, as the Germans were making so much propaganda out of the discovery of the mass graves of Polish officers at Katyn. But in all the British histories of the war, there has never been any reference to the incident at Montreal in which Sikorski nearly lost his life.

nor for that matter had the sabotage of the aircraft of another exiled government's leader been revealed until quite recently: on May 11, 1967, a letter in the *Daily Telegraph* disclosed that sabotage was discovered in a British plane carrying General de Gaulle, shortly before it took off.[51] As the British Government's support for de Gaulle at that time, the spring of 1943, was causing as much dissension with Washington as its support for General Sikorski was causing with Moscow, it seems appropriate to investigate the de Gaulle incident in closer detail than the writer of the letter, who had been a passenger in the aircraft, could relate.

It is a matter of record that Mr Churchill's memoranda of early 1943 rang with veiled threats to General de Gaulle, urging him to offer closer co-operation to his western Allies and to be more accommodating to other French leaders, particularly General Giraud, with whom a bitter clash had been precipitated by the assassination

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of Admiral Darlan towards the end of 1942; the assassination had left French North Africa politically leaderless, and the dispute between Giraud and de Gaulle was souring the whole Western Alliance. In January 1943, Churchill had advised de Gaulle that the British could get on very well without him, and he asked Eden to "knock him about pretty hard" for his own sake. In a personal interview with the French leader, Churchill warned de Gaulle that if he continued to be an obstacle to Allied planning, the British would not hesitate to break with him finally.

De Gaulle had remained obdurate, and Churchill was concerned to see that President Roosevelt was plying him with an increasing number of accusations against the General furnished by the State Department and American Secret Service; it seemed increasingly clear that British support of de Gaulle might lead to an estrangement between the British and American governments. Towards the end of May, he even cabled London from Washington asking them to consider urgently whether it would not be best to eliminate de Gaulle altogether as a political figure.[52]

When the newspaper item was raised with the Ministry of Defence, they replied that there was no record of any unusual incident occurring on the General's flight concerned, on April 21, 1943.[53] This author has however traced the pilot, and a most unusual story has emerged: on that date General de Gaulle was due to fly to Glasgow to distribute decorations to sailors of the Free French Navy; in his party were the Commander-in-Chief of the Free French Navy, Admiral Auboyneau; a British liaison officer, Lieutenant Commander E. D. P. Pinks, RNVR; Captain François Charles-Roux, de Gaulle's aide de camp; and Lieutenant William Bonaparte-Wyse, the Admiral's Flag Lieutenant. Normally de Gaulle did not fly anywhere, but on this occasion Glasgow was so far that the Air Ministry had suggested about three days before that he should fly.[54]

A Wellington bomber, which had been converted to passenger transportation in No. 24 Squadron, Transport Command, was placed at his disposal, and Flight Lieutenant Peter Loat, D.F.C., was allocated to fly the party to the airfield nearest to Glasgow, which in those days was Abbotsinch. Loat checked the weather at about nine

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A.M., and half an hour later the security officers came to check the aircraft, a converted Wellington Mark IA; these carried three crew and ten passengers, normally. There were five such Wellingtons in Loat's Flight at the time.

General de Gaulle's party arrived about a quarter of an hour later. They were met by the Squadron Commander of No. 24 Squadron, and ten minutes later all of them boarded the aircraft after being properly fitted out with Mae Wests and parachute harness. Loat started the twin engines and taxied onto the runway, where he ran up his engines, and tested them and his flight controls in the prescribed manner. Everything was functioning normally, and at 10.05 A.M. he was granted permission to move onto the head of the runway and take off.

The take-off procedure at Hendon airport was rather complicated for Wellington bombers in those days. It was a heavy aircraft, and the runway was short and there was a somewhat daunting railway embankment at its end. Loat's custom was to turn his Wellington round at the very extreme end of the runway, then apply his parking brakes until both engines were racing at maximum power; then he would lift the tail off the ground by using his elevator controls, and with the aircraft in "flying position" would race down the runway at high speed, gaining enough momentum to lift over the embankment at its end.

On this occasion, his Wellington had no sooner lifted its tail off the ground than the elevator control column went loose in his hand, and the tail dropped back to the ground. Loat throttled back the engines at once, thankful that he had not begun his take-off run; he looked out of his side window, and operated his control column, but there was no movement from the elevators at all. Somewhere the controls had parted. He informed the control tower that the aircraft was unserviceable, and returned to the tarmac. A Wing Commander was waiting for him. Flight Lieutenant Loat told him what was wrong, and General de Gaulle and his party were asked to leave the plane. The pilot and his maintenance Flight Sergeant climbed into the aircraft's tail, together with the Wing Commander, who was the airport security officer. Here they discovered that the controls

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had parted at the bolt line of the plate which connects the control rods to the elevator: from the nature of the fracture it was concluded that a powerful acid had been employed, and in this way the control system had passed muster during the routine maintenance inspection.

General de Gaulle and his party were transferred to another plane. The Wing Commander asked the pilot to select another one at random, which he thought least likely to have been sabotaged; he picked a training aircraft, a Hudson, and it was in this plane that the whole party took off at eleven o'clock for Glasgow. There was a highly secret investigation of the whole incident, to which the pilot submitted written evidence; samples of the fractured unit were sent to R.A.E. Farnborough for analysis, and it was subsequently confirmed to the pilot that there had been sabotage. He was given to believe that the Germans were responsible.[55] It is not possible now to establish the conclusions of the security branch's investigations, as they are by custom not revealed. General de Gaulle returned from Glasgow by train, and he never again flew by plane in Britain.[56]

It cannot be denied that the possibility remains that some or even all of these incidents – the belly-landings, elevators jamming, controls breaking, camouflaged sabotage bombs and engine defects – have explanations which are anything but sinister. But when prominent and controversial statesmen were the passengers, it was not to be wondered if suspicion was generated in some circles by the secrecy that was cast around them by the British authorities.

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8: Post Mortem

The Sikorski crash was a case which had abounded with mysteries. At one stage during the diving operations off Gibraltar's Eastern Beach, Lieutenant William Bailey's shallow-water divers had surfaced to find themselves subjected to a hail of machine-gun fire from a pill-box on the Spanish side of the neutral zone between Spain and Gibraltar; the aircraft wreckage was clearly well to the British side of the frontier, and this minor incident has remained a mystery to this day.[1]

Various theories still had to be examined. The Poles did not attach undue significance to the Mae West inconsistency. At the end of November 1943, the Polish Air Force assembled a further commission of experts to investigate a possibility that had been ignored by the British, the possibility of pilot error. This was soon ruled improbable in view of the pilot's considerable experience in Liberator aircraft. The commission did re-examine the mystery of the pilot's Mae West, and concluded that "it cannot be excluded that the pilot could quite mechanically have put on his lifejacket without being aware of it."

Perhaps most significant was the assertion made by this final Polish commission that in an aircraft as complicated as a Liberator the possibility of sabotage could never be ruled out altogether, "especially under the conditions of mutual trust which prevail on Brit-

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ish airfields."[2] There were many in Gibraltar who were not convinced by the findings of the Court of Inquiry, including the Governor, and apparently the Air Officer Commanding, Air Commodore Simpson,[3] and the Station Commander, Group-Captain Bolland. Their opinions will be discussed in the next chapter.

in the winter of 1943, General Mason-Macfarlane returned to London on a brief leave, and he called privately on General Sikorski's widow at her home on the corner of Gunnersbury Avenue in Acton, to offer his condolences. Macfarlane related to Madame Sikorska how he had had premonitions about the Liberator, and had urged the General to fly on by another plane, possibly the plane which had brought Maisky to Gibraltar; unable to define his feelings to Sikorski, he had not succeeded in persuading him to change planes. To the widow he communicated something of his disquiet about the affair. He was so nervous during the whole of his interview with her that he left both her and her companions with a clear impression, though perhaps not intended, that there was very much more to the affair than met the eye.[4]

Madame Sikorska is now of the belief that her husband's death was not an accident but sabotage probably by the Russians. She expressed some disappointment that the pilot (Edward Prchal), who was the sole survivor of the crash, had never once called to see her in all the years he was in England afterwards.

After her husband's death, Mrs Churchill sent her an inscribed photograph of Winston and herself, and Mr Churchill sent her an invitation to accompany him on the saluting base at the Victory Parade in 1945. The latter invitation she declined, and Mr Churchill later wrote to her that he understood why Poles could not join in the victory celebrations.

Madame Sikorska also rejected an offer of accommodation for the rest of her life at Hampton Court Palace; she now lives in genteel retirement in southern England: "There is no Sikorski family any more. I see the loss of my husband and daughter as my sacrifice for Poland." She saw Mr Churchill only once more, at a cocktail party

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given ten years later at the opening of the General Sikorski Historical Institute. She avoided meeting him.

There is a passage in the record of the conversation between Rolf Hochhuth, author of the controversial new play *Soldiers* about General Sikorski and Winston Churchill, and the General's widow in which the essence of Sikorski's position as the keystone of the Polish problem is laid bare: "Many times Madame Sikorska stressed that her husband had been less a politician than a soldier and a human being; Mr Churchill had adored *him*, but not the Poles as such . . ." The death of General Sikorski marked in consequence a real turning point in Polish influence.[5] The British had no intention of allowing the new Polish Prime Minister, Mr Mikolajczyk, to threaten either the Grand Alliance or the Allies' prospects of settling the many other questions – not just the Polish problem – outstanding in their relations with the Russians.

Before leaving for the Foreign Ministers' Conference in Moscow in October 1943, Anthony Eden told the new Polish Prime Minister that unless the Polish Government in London agreed to relinquish the eastern areas demanded by the Russians, there was little prospect of a renewal of diplomatic relations with Moscow, or of securing Soviet approval for its right to administer the liberated Polish territories. According to Mikolajczyk he was "flabbergasted to hear Eden echoing these thoughts as if they were routine, not contemptible." He made it clear that he was in no wise authorising Mr Eden to discuss the question of Poland's post-war frontiers.[6]

Eden and Churchill had three months before (in August 1943) *already* decided that the whole of Poland to the East of the so-called Curzon Line should be sacrificed to the Russians, even though they recognised that this would be acting contrary to the much-heralded Atlantic Charter of 1941. At the Teheran Conference at the end of November 1943, Churchill formally sided with Stalin on this issue, and from that time on Stalin knew that all of Poland east of the Curzon Line (whose precise course seemed to be unknown to the British participants at the Conference) would be ceded to Russia. Poland was not represented at the Conference.[7]

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During the summer of 1944, as the London Polish Government had warned all along, the Soviet Government sponsored a Committee of National Liberation in Poland, which the Red Army was now liberating.[8] The Committee was chaired by a Polish Communist operating under a false name. This Committee, the Soviet Government addressed as the only legal authority in Poland, while Mr Mikolajczyk's Government in London, which had fought consistently at the Allied side on many fronts, and organised a formidable Underground Army in Poland ever since 1939, was dismissed as an "illegal and self-styled authority."

In August 1944, 40,000 Polish troops of the Underground Army in Warsaw rose in insurrection against their German oppressors, determined to capture the city and establish a Western-aligned Government before it was overrun by the Red Army. The Red Army held back long enough for this Underground Army to be destroyed. Knowledge of the true state of affairs outside Warsaw was lacking, but the Germans were claiming to have annihilated a Soviet armoured force. On the other hand reliable reports soon reached the British Foreign Office that the Soviet troops were disarming the Underground Army and arresting and shooting the administrative leaders who had been emplaced on its authority. To the Polish protests in London, Mr Eden replied that we could not yet assume an absence of Soviet good will. But a week later, when the Americans prepared to parachute supplies to the beleaguered Underground Army in Warsaw, the Russians refused to allow the planes to use Soviet landing grounds, and the plan had to be dropped.[9]

Only in the last two weeks of August did Eden and Churchill realise that Stalin was planning in cold earnest, and then their appeals and threats had no effect on him until all was already lost. The Polish General commanding the insurgents was forced to surrender in the first days of October, and with the subsequent destruction of the Underground Army in Poland, the last vestiges of Mr Mikolajczyk's military authority in Poland went. "General Sosnkowski, Sikorski's ultimate successor[10] as Commander-in-Chief, openly blamed the Allied Command for not giving more aid to the Warsaw Poles, and his anti-Russian stand was now more trouble-

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some than it had been before. Mr Churchill and Eden secured his dismissal from his post, and with his head on a salver they set off for Moscow some days later, followed by an anxious Mikolajczyk and two of his Ministers.

In Moscow, Churchill openly informed Mikolajczyk for the first time that he supported Russia's claim to all the Polish territories east of the Curzon Line; in other words, he was formally conceding to Stalin what Hitler and Ribbentrop had first promised him in August 1939. Winston Churchill warned Mr Mikolajczyk that unless the Polish Government agreed to Russia's demands, there would be a "great change" in Britain's attitude to the Polish Government in London. The time was past, he added, when the London Poles could afford the luxury of indulging their patriotic feeling – the Great Powers could not allow themselves to be drawn into a "Polish domestic squabble," as he termed it. He turned a deaf ear on Mikolajczyk's obvious rejoinder that the quarrel was with the Soviet Union, not with fellow-Poles. Churchill continued that if Mikolajczyk did not accept the Curzon Line as Stalin demanded, Britain would have no more to do with him. As the official history, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War*, describes, Mikolajczyk was advised that if he accepted the line, when he and his friends returned to their country they would get a chance of helping to administer Poland instead of being swept aside and even "liquidated."[11] In describing this stormy interview in his memoirs, Mikolajczyk said of Churchill, "he had been (and remains) my friend."

Mikolajczyk honourably resigned on November 23, 1944. From this point on, the British and American governments fought a losing battle against the implementation by Stalin of his plans for Soviet domination of post-war Poland.

At a debate on Poland in the House of Commons on December 15, Mr Churchill made a telling *faux pas* when, in conceding that territorial changes must normally await the peace conference, he added that changes that were "mutually agreed" were an exception. This was the first public hint that Britain had any intention of going back on the Atlantic Charter's principles, and it produced the widest possible diplomatic ripples, particularly in America. Anthony

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Eden sought to correct the misstatement, as he called it, but from that day on the clear impression prevailed that there were to be secret agreements between the major powers, whereby the minor nations were carved up amongst them.[12] This was what subsequently happened: Poland, for whose freedom the world had gone to war, was represented at neither the Yalta nor the Potsdam conferences in 1945. At the Potsdam conference, Churchill and Stalin settled the details of a new Polish Provisional Government in which the former London authorities were to have little voice except through Mikolajczyk as Second Deputy Premier and Minister of Agriculture. The days of the London Polish Government were over.

(ii)

After leaving hospital, Flight Lieutenant Edward Prchal resumed his flying operations in Transport Command and continued flying until the end of the war; he called in at Gibraltar several times on his way to India and other far-off places, and exchanged greetings with his friends on the Rock. He married a woman journalist, Dorothy Sperkova, and soon after the war was over he returned to Prague. In the three years before the Communist coup there, he and other former R.A.F. officers built up a thriving airline, Czechoslovakian State Airways. After the coup, these R.A.F. officers were the first object of the increasing persecution; some fled through the Iron Curtain almost at once, leaving literally everything behind them. Most came to London and settled down anew, some of them even rejoining the R.A.F. Prchal stayed on in Czechoslovakia, aware that the Communists needed some qualified pilots to run their airline for them.

Then the legends of Prchal's "death" began. In the winter of 1948, a C.S.A. Dakota crashed into the mountains near Athens, killing everybody aboard. In the newspapers, Prchal's recent colleagues sorrowed to read that he, the pilot, had been among the victims. But he was not dead. Prchal stayed on in Czechoslovakia long enough to assemble his possessions and in October 1950 he flew in a stolen

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Dakota to the R.A.F. station at Manston in Kent, bringing his wife with him.

On June 28, 1952, he recorded an interview with Radio Free Europe, in which he described an extraordinary incident shortly before he fled from Prague: "For a few years," Prchal said, "I was left in peace, but in 1948 an agent of the security service, called Dr Brom, started to pester me. He wanted me to testify that the British Intelligence Service was responsible for the so-called sabotage of Sikorski's plane. The matter came to a head during the trial of Doboszinski in Warsaw in 1949 – a man of whose existence I had never heard before in my life. He was convicted of conspiring against Sikorski. I was afraid that I might soon also be a victim of political intrigue, but luckily I succeeded in escaping to the West."

A year later, in an interview published in the *Polish Daily* in London, Prchal gave more detail on the Warsaw trial which had finally decided him to flee: "On June 18 [1949] the trial was opened in Warsaw of a certain Adam Doboszinski, accused by the Communists of espionage for the Western Powers. Obviously under pressure he admitted to being responsible for the sabotage of the plane in which General Sikorski died. Doboszinski was sentenced to death. This made me feel that my turn might come next."[13]

In April 1962, Prchal's recorded interview was again broadcast by Radio Free Europe, and this time it was prefaced by the news that Prchal had recorded this statement in 1952, "three years before his death."[14] The legend had been reborn. Until quite recently there was widespread amongst the Poland émigré community in Europe a further most circumstantial rumour that Prchal had been stabbed to death in a brawl in a Chicago street. Happily, he is still alive and lives with his wife in California, where the *Sunday Telegraph* traced him in 1967. Now fifty-six years old, Prchal talks freely with journalists about the Sikorski crash.

"I was unconscious for three days and doubted I would live," he told the *Sunday Telegraph*. He added, "The R.A.F. Court of Inquiry was absolutely honest and thorough. And after recovering from my injuries I continued to fly V.I.P. passengers right to the end of the war." He told the *Sunday Express* that interfering with the elevator

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controls seemed the least likely way of sabotaging an aircraft: "One might use explosives, timing or magnetic devices, but trying to jam the elevator is out of the question."[15]

In his earlier *Polish Daily* interview he no longer claimed to have eased the control column forward at 150 feet, and then discovered that his elevator controls had jammed: he now talked of climbing to "about 300 feet" and then: "After trimming the elevator I suddenly felt a mighty shudder and found that the controls were entirely blocked. I shouted an order and the engineer jumped to the control lock, only to find that it was actually free . . . The plane immediately went into a dive."[16] This second version of events would no doubt have greatly interested the Court of Inquiry had it been put to them ten years before.

Edward Prchal's reaction to the various outside theories put forward as to the cause of the accident is also of interest. Would it not, he now says, have been so simple for him to admit after all these years that what had really happened was what, for example, Group Captain Bolland suggested: a case of human fallibility, a case of the pilot's losing his horizon? And would this not have been the perfect answer to what he terms the "slander of the century," the suggestion that he deliberately staged an accident to kill General Sikorski? But was it not impressive that even in these circumstances he was still adhering to his original story that the elevator controls had locked?[17]

Yet possibly for purely medical reasons, Prchal's evidence to the Court was perhaps inadvertently not an accurate description of what actually happened. There is medical opinion that although shock alone was diagnosed, there was very likely to have been a post-concussive retrograde amnesia as well, which could have amounted to as much as one minute: what would have appeared to Prchal (at the Court of Inquiry) to have been a genuine recollection of events during the seconds before impact, was thus likely to have been an unconscious rationalisation in terms of the drill which he knew he would have carried out in any case.[18] This could explain some of the inconsistencies in his statement to the Court.

Although there is no suggestion that Prchal staged the accident, the possibility that the crash was planned by somebody cannot be

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ruled out. Nor is it enough to point, as some people have, to the extreme clumsiness of any saboteur whose mechanism functioned so early that the aircraft crashed in full sight of everybody, only 700 yards off shore. In theory, the chance of rescue was high: in practice it was well known that Liberators were death-traps when they came down in the sea, and in the words of the R.A.F. Court of Inquiry, "Investigations by the Court have revealed that fifteen minutes is the minimum time under the present organisation in which the duty high-speed launch can be expected off the east end of the runway after an aircraft has crashed."[19]

To the layman, perfect sabotage is when an aircraft disappears without a trace in mid-Atlantic; but any country trying to dispose cleanly of a General so publicly important as Sikorski would *have* to make his death seem accidental, and impossible to prove as otherwise. Private knowledge of the earlier incidents where Sikorski was endangered in aircraft would lend still greater force to this requirement.

(iii)

Although the crash of General Sikorski's Liberator off Gibraltar had every appearance of being an accident, and looked like this even to the pilot, it follows that it cannot merely for these reasons be excluded that it was sabotage. If the crash had been organised in advance, the only possible mechanism by which it was induced seems to have been more sophisticated than has ever been suspected, a process which, to emulate the phrase employed by the anonymous Polish Underground Movement bill-posters after Katyn, "does honour to" whichever nation was responsible.

The German propaganda organs at once accused the British of murdering the General, and they called him "The Last Victim of Katyn." Some of their more preposterous allegations have been examined earlier. Stalin, for his part, was equally happy to cast suspicion on his Allies: in 1944 he privately warned the Yugoslav leaders to beware of the British Intelligence services particularly as far as Tito's life was concerned; he added that he believed the British had

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killed Sikorski while he was in the Liberator, then "shot it down." No proof, no witnesses.[20] Why the former action should have been necessary if the plane was to be shot down, is not explained. No doubt Edward Prchal would also have protested his annoyance either to the Court of Inquiry or to this author if he felt his plane had been "shot down." In short there is no reason to suppose that Stalin knew closer details of the crash than had the German Foreign Office in broadcasting their similar details barely two hours after receiving the news of Sikorski's death. And there was no London newspaper to dub Stalin "Hitler's Russian Ally" for spreading such a rumour without evidence.

Many Poles are inclined to believe that the crash was engineered by the Russians; such is the view, for example, of Madame Sikorska. In Warsaw, the Communists at one stage even accused Mr Mikolajczyk of having caused the death of Sikorski,[21] as part of a campaign to discredit the few non-Communist members of the coalition in the eyes of the Polish people. Subsequently, a Polish Communist author published a book in which he adduced spurious evidence that the crash was brought about by General Anders and one of his officers, the British Colonel Hulls; as this author, Mr Jerzy Klimkowski, was arrested during the war and imprisoned on Anders' instructions on suspicion of espionage for the Soviet Union, one does not have to look far for his motives in making these allegations.

While General Lahousen, the wartime German sabotage chief, has boasted that one of his men put sugar in the Liberator's petrol tank (a claim which will shortly be examined) more recently the German playwright, Rolf Hochhuth, has claimed to have proof that Sikorski was murdered by British Intelligence. Herr Hochhuth learned his evidence on the Sikorski issue in the late autumn of 1963, he states; his informant was a British national, a member of the British Intelligence service. This testimony has been deposited in a Swiss bank in order to safeguard the identity of his still-living informant.

In adopting this procedure, the German playwright has followed another illustrious author's precedent: it will be recalled that when base allegations were levelled against Mr Winston Churchill about

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the manner of his escape from the Boers, he declined for thirty years to disclose the proof that he had escaped by honourable means, since "to have done so would have compromised the liberty and perhaps the lives of those who had helped me."[22]

Applying the classical rules for the solution of murder mysteries, it must be shown that, if a murder has been committed, the person accused had both the motive and the opportunity.

Of those who had the opportunity to organise the crash, if it was organised, the Germans must *prima facie* rank high: they had a well-organised sabotage section with proven efficiency in Gibraltar, and they would evidently suffer no compunctions about killing Britons and Poles alike. There were two contenders – the S.S. and the *Abwehr* – to be viewed in any investigation: yet the *Abwehr* must probably be ruled out of any investigation altogether, for reasons which will immediately become apparent. The diary of General Lahousen, head of the *Abwehr's* sabotage section, details the successful and the unsuccessful sabotage operations conducted by *Abwehr II* in Gibraltar, yet while there is no mention of General Sikorski in the diary, there is equally strong evidence to suggest that the *Abwehr* was not responsible for the General's death.

Firstly, the only sabotage operations conducted by the whole *Abwehr* unit in Gibraltar during June and July 1943 as reported to Berlin were the destruction of between one and two million litres of fuel, the sinking of a barge and lesser damage to a destroyer and a patrol boat on June 30, and the destruction of a million litres of aviation spirit on July 7.[23]

Nor was this all, for it appears that there were deep-rooted objections to any German attempts at assassination: when for example the German Army General Staff had privately appealed to Lahousen's superior, Admiral Canaris, for a sabotage attack on the Russian military headquarters, Canaris had visited the German General Staff's headquarters and refused outright. "In this connection," Lahousen had recorded in his diary on February 2, 1943, "the Department Head [Canaris] has expressly forbidden *Abwehr II* [i.e., sabotage] attacks directed against individual personages, on principle."[24] Lahousen's memory therefore seemed to be at fault when he ver-

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bally told two journalists who interviewed him for their book *They Spied on England* that one of his agents had put sugar in the Liberator's petrol tanks and this had caused the crash.[25] He may have confused this with an earlier episode, which *was* referred to in his diary, when on February 26, 1942 a Wellington bomber was sabotaged by the Gibraltar unit and had to make a forced landing in the sea.[26]

Nor was Canaris the only one opposed to political assassinations as a device of war, for after German forensic experts had determined that the apparently natural death of King Boris of Bulgaria in August 1943 had in fact been caused by a poison, apparently of Soviet origin, Hitler took the opportunity in private of commenting that he had never understood why his enemies sought to fight with means like these, when he had never had an enemy statesman murdered in his life.[27] Hitler, of course, had most to lose if a general war of assassination were to be encouraged against unpopular heads of state.

It has been suggested in an earlier chapter that the Germans had political motives for wanting to keep General Sikorski alive. But by the same token as his existence was an advantage to the Germans, it was becoming a burden on the Grand Alliance. But it should be recorded that General Kukiel, then Minister of Defence in Sikorski's Government and now head of the General Sikorski Historical Institute in London, and former London Minister Karol Popiel take the view that the General's death was a blow to Churchill's efforts to restore Soviet-Polish relations. Men of such contrasted backgrounds as Mr Marian Turski, editor of the serious Warsaw journal *Polityka*, and Mr Popiel are at one in believing that it was the extremist right-wing Poles (who from 1941 had bitterly distrusted Sikorski's capacity to compromise with the Russians) who had the strongest motive for his liquidation.[28]

Admittedly Sikorski's apparent assassination would serve the Nazi cause if the Allies could be blamed, and this was a *second-order* motive for the Germans to have instigated it. But the primary motives arguing for his survival would seem to have been stronger; we have seen how unwilling Foreign Minister Ribbentrop was to sanction operations providing purely temporary propaganda *bonnes-bouches* if they entailed forfeiting a strong long-term political position.

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While in the West the Germans sought to accuse the British of the assassination, in their eastern territories they threw the blame by implication onto the Russians. Particularly in occupied Poland was this so. In a faked Polish underground leaflet circulated after the crash (*How did General Sikorski Die?*) the great prestige possessed by Sikorski both at home and abroad was stressed, but it was pointed out that he had stood for the independence of the Polish state and the integrity of its borders, which made him a grave obstacle to some elements of the Grand Alliance. "Let us start to seek the assassins not amongst our enemies, but amongst our friends," suggested this "Polish Underground" leaflet.

Could it be, as "German propaganda" was claiming, that Britain's notorious Intelligence service was guilty of the crimes? In view of its vast experience, known lack of scruples and far ramifications, this was a tempting solution; but "was it really in England's interests for Sikorski to be removed?" The leaflet suggested that it was not. General Sikorski's death would not resolve the dispute over the eastern territories of Poland, since his successors would be even less inclined to work with the Soviets than he had been. Britain's position was certainly simplified by the removal of a Polish statesman of Sikorski's calibre; but the leaflet concluded that British complicity was "possible but not very probable."

"Our official enemies, the Germans" would have killed Sikorski only if he was likely to be succeeded by somebody capable of worsening Anglo-Soviet relations still further, and indeed to the point where Germany could sign a separate peace treaty with one or other of her enemies. In fact the likelihood of this was low, since the British would ensure that Sikorski's successor was one who would compromise with Soviet demands. Besides, if the arm of the German Intelligence service would reach out so dramatically to Gibraltar, why had it not struck when Mr Churchill or the King bad passed through there? Only one nation, the Russians, stood to gain from the death of General Sikorski, the leaflet pointed out.[29]

In a second, similar leaflet (*The Truth about Sikorski*) the Germans repeated that the Russians were to blame: they suggested mys-

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teriously that Katyn and Sikorski's death were crimes "closely connected and committed by the same hand."

This second "Polish" leaflet continued: "After all, quite a lot of British people belong to the Communist Party and there are surely not a few of them in the technical staff on Gibraltar airfield. For some time already there has been a Soviet military mission in Gibraltar, and we all know full well what Soviet missions preoccupy themselves with." Besides, there would be many Communists among the Spanish labourers.[30]

What is the real likelihood that the Russians were involved? So far as can be ascertained, they have never shrunk from the assassination of opponents. From the open axing of Leon Trotsky in Mexico in 1940, to the private murder of King Boris in 1943, they have fought their enemies with methods both old-fashioned[31] and alien to the Western powers. Yet would it really have served the interests of the Soviet Union if Sikorski was removed? His existence, and his openly anti-Soviet stand on the question of the eastern territories, was the fact which had enabled the Soviet Government to break off diplomatic relations with the London Poles, an event which was an irreversible adjunct of their programme for the domination of post-war Poland. Besides, despite the fortuitous proximity of Ambassador Maisky's and General Sikorski's Liberators on the parking area at North Front on the morning of July 4, 1943, there is no evidence that the Russians had the opportunity to arrange to sabotage the plane. In a recent letter, for what it is worth, Maisky has given his word of honour that he was not involved in Sikorski's death. On the contrary, he still refuses to believe that he and the Polish general were at Gibraltar at the same time, so effective were Macfarlane's security arrangements.[32]

The British might seem to have had both motive and opportunity: they after all ran the airfield at North Front. They were the ones who organised Sikorski's whole journey, who provided the plane and its crew and who conducted the Inquiry after his death. Direct proof in the form of written orders will scarcely ever come to light, for they are likely if they exist to remain among that category of documents which under the Public Records Act can remain "closed"

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for an indefinite period. Such documentary records of plans for assassinations at a different level by British forces do exist. At least one eye-witness – not this author – caught an unauthorised glimpse of them in the Cabinet Office files ten years ago: there were orders signed by General Alan Brooke in May 1944 empowering S.O.E. to carry out certain assassination operations against German officials, in particular the Chief of the Gestapo in Paris just before D-day.

There is some evidence that the date of Sikorski's return was advanced at Mr Churchill's instigation, and that the trip itself to the Middle East was undertaken with Mr Churchill's personal encouragement. Six weeks later he received the telegram congratulating him on his triumph, and looking forward to his early return. The only far-fetched significance that might be read into an immediate return on a specific date, in the context of a British sabotage plan, would be to ensure that the "accident" at Gibraltar coincided with some other arranged event – in this case, the arrival of Ambassador Maisky with a Russian diplomatic party on the same airfield comes to mind. If anybody did suspect sabotage, would not suspicion fall on the Russians? The bait was certainly taken in post-war years.[33] But the truth is that thanks to Governor Mason-Macfarlane's genius for improvised farce – with which any Whitehall conspirator could hardly have reckoned – Maisky was successfully prevented from even guessing that he was in the same colony, let alone under the same roof as General Sikorski.

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9: Open Verdict

That it can be argued that the British ostensibly had both motive and opportunity to bring about the Liberator's crash does not establish how the crash was caused, or prove that it *was* sabotage. The Court of Inquiry, after all, ruled that it was an accident, and that the pilot was not to blame.

Yet there are the basic difficulties. There were inconsistencies in the evidence given to the Court and in the later statements of those concerned in the tragedy. There were the Unmentioned precedents, the mystery of the mailbag on the runway, of the money on the plane, and of the telephone call in London six weeks before. But the difficulties in accepting the notion of sabotage are equally formidable, not least of them being the problems of organisation and communication, and the hazards of involving so many people in the conspiracy.

It must be concluded that even after the passage of nearly a quarter of a century, the case is nowhere near being closed. The main mysteries remain, and of these one of the most persistent is the fact that Prchal, the pilot, should have denied wearing a Mae West when he was undoubtedly wearing it by the time he was picked up out of the sea. That it had been put on without any parachute harness beneath it suggests that it was put on solely in connection with this

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crash, but whether he put it on before or after the impact will perhaps never be learned with certainty.

The logical explanation from a consideration of his relatively unimportant injuries would be that he was strapped in by his seat belt, and that, injured though he was, he released himself after the crash, and put the Mae West on; and that subsequently his mind became a blank on his actions at this time.[1]

He himself told the Court, it will be recalled, "The aircraft immediately hit the water and I remember no more." This being so, his later recollection that he was flung out of the aircraft by the crash must be viewed with some reserve. One would have preferred to have had some positive statement from Prchal on this seemingly important issue, and it must be admitted that we have been disappointed to receive no word of reply to two specific requests for his explanation of the Mae West inconsistency.[2] However, we can turn away from the Mae West, and with the Polish investigators regard it as being an inconsistency of no significance.

Edward Prchal's attitude now may well of course be governed by a belief that having been formally cleared of blame by the Court of Inquiry, he has no obligation to submit to a renewed interrogation by anybody. As he has told this author, he is "content" with the Court's findings.

We are not, however, satisfied that the Court explored every possibility in trying to establish the cause of the Liberator's crash. Apart from the various particular omissions of the Court of Inquiry, which have been remarked upon in adequate detail in earlier chapters, it suffered two general shortcomings of a more serious nature: the first was that it was conditioned by a general atmosphere of desire to establish that there had been no sabotage; and the second was that it investigated only the cause of the crash that had been suggested to it by the pilot.

These are common failings in official inquiries. If by all accounts the Warren Commission was inspired by the wish to establish that there had been no conspiracy to kill President Kennedy, so too the Gibraltar Inquiry would hope to establish that there had been no sabotage.

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The critics who are now burrowing in the evidence assembled by the American Commission, and pointing to its inconsistencies, have a better chance of arriving at the truth in the long run than any author investigating the Sikorski affair. This author does not hesitate to admit that even what follows in these pages lays no claim to being a final and complete analysis. As the reader will comprehend, the difficulties in establishing the truth about an incident after a quarter-century are quite formidable: the trail is long cold, and sources of information that would have been open to the official Inquiry, had its investigation not been channelled along such limited lines in 1943, are now either "closed," destroyed or dead. Of the thirty witnesses called by the Court, for example, this author has traced and interviewed only fourteen; three more are known to have died, and many of the others must be dead as well. Again, almost all of the evidence taken and recorded at the Inquiry in Gibraltar was heard in connection with the cause stated by the pilot; it must be assessed accordingly, and used to establish other explanations only with caution. We hope that we have done so.

there are a number of theories on the cause of this Liberator's crash, but none of them accords with *all* the evidence. While the Inquiry regarded only the pilot's theory as of any substance, we feel that all should be considered.

"Many of us on the Rock indulged in a great deal of thought and speculation regarding how such an inexplicable crash should have occurred, and all those whose judgement I value, including my A.O.C., finally agreed with me that the disaster was clearly due either to an error of judgement or, more likely, a temporary black-out on the part of the pilot." Thus the Governor writing in 1945[3] summed up the cause of the crash of Liberator AL523; and in his unique position with access to the Inquiry investigations, and as the fountainhead of informed opinion amongst the serving officers on the Rock, his conclusions cannot be lightly dismissed, particularly in view of his sense of close personal involvement through his friendship with Sikorski. His personal opinion was that the pilot must have had some kind of mental breakdown: "Although when I said

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'Goodbye' to Prchal just before he climbed aboard he appeared absolutely normal, I think that he must have had some form of mental aberration which led him, for the first time in years, to put on his Mae West. I think that this mental aberration ceased while he was actually taking off, but that it came on again almost at once; that in the darkness he lost his horizon, and in fact he flew the aircraft inexorably straight into the sea without realising what he was doing until the very last second when it was too late to do anything except switch off his engines."[4] The idea of pilot illness was suggested by at least one German newspaper which put forward the thesis that he had been suffering from a kind of urological disease.[5]

A theory of pilot error was also advanced by the Station Commander, Group Captain Bolland[6]: he believed Prchal had tried to find his horizon visually, and in looking down to his instruments again had unconsciously pushed his control column forward an inch or so, which would result in the shallow dive into the sea witnessed by everybody on the ground. He had subsequently had to cover up his error, and invented the story of the elevator controls jamming.

A view similar to this is held today by the pilot's flight commander of the time, Squadron Leader J. F. Sach, who believes that the pilot made an error in the handling of the plane, that "in the inky blackness" in which he was flying he did not realise that the plane was in fact in a shallow dive instead of flying level, until it was too late.[7]

(Presumably, if this was what happened the second pilot, either by hearing Prchal's cry of "crash landing" or by realising the mistake himself, would have quickly tried to put into operation the standard ditching procedure by switching off the engines, which were out of the first pilot's reach.[8])

This author is not qualified to express any opinion on these theories; the Court might possibly have been able to judge them at the time, had they been put to it. But it must be continually borne in mind that this pilot was one of the most outstanding Liberator pilots in the world, and pilots do not fly unless they are mentally and physically fit men. Equally, the absurd notion that the pilot deliberately ditched the plane, thereby putting not only his crew but also himself, in mortal danger, does not merit further consideration.

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Another theory which had been advanced is that of freak atmospheric conditions. Lieutenant Lubienski in reporting to the Polish Ministry of Justice gave it as his opinion that the crash was not the result of sabotage. There was, he stated, an air turbulence peculiar to Gibraltar caused by the Rock jutting out into the sea. This turbulence he suggested might have changed the direction of the plane's flight and the pilot was unable to regain control. Another witness of the crash has also suggested to the author freak air conditions as its cause.[9] Against this theory there are two weighty factors to be considered: firstly, again, the pilot's experience and high reputation, for his skill in taking off and landing at Gibraltar[10]; and secondly, that the Court of Inquiry reported no freak weather conditions, and air turbulence would surely have been considered. They gave conditions as "Wind easterly, five m.p.h. Fine, no cloud, visibility ten miles."

the question of the aircraft's loading was not, as we have seen, rigorously investigated at the Inquiry. In the Governor's account of the crash there occurs the phrase, "The aircraft was definitely not overloaded."[11] This conclusion might perhaps have been drawn solely from the scanty evidence taken by the Inquiry, but it is equally possible that a theory of overloading might have been one of those discussed privately later and discarded.

But it is clear that the suggestion that the plane crashed through heavy loading was being bandied about at the time, at any rate amongst the Poles. In the memoirs of Mikolajczyk, by whom as Sikorski's successor as Prime Minister all papers relating to the crash would have been studied, there is the significantly worded sentence: "At eleven P.M. on July 4, 1943, Sikorski's Liberator plane struggled heavily off the short runway to Gibraltar and, as if driven by a sudden gust, plummeted into the water at full power."[12]

The pilot has himself, it has been said, put forward explanations based on heavy loading. The first report is that of Mr A. D. Firth, who had navigated AL523 shortly before the disaster, and who visited Prchal in hospital in Gibraltar. "His own belief was that some of the luggage (*well in excess of what was normally permitted*) of the general's staff had come loose and fouled a cable, in what was after

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all a military aircraft only summarily adapted for passenger service" (our italics).[13]

It has not been found possible to accredit the ownership of the consignments of Leica cameras and Turkish Delight which the salvage operations discovered. We know that the pilot was carrying three suitcases on behalf of a high officer in the Middle East[14] (presumably containing the furs about which he inquired from Group Captain Bolland[15]), and we cannot exclude the possibility that members of the crew may have been engaged in performing similar acts of kindness.

That a heavy load was the direct cause of the crash because it made the elevator controls ineffective is – this author has been told – what Prchal later imparted to a friend.[16] That the pilot is alleged to have formed this view is of course of great interest, but he expressed it in 1945, two years after the crash, and it was probably the result of a strong subconscious desire to find a completely rational and practical explanation.

Three Liberator experts have independently informed us that, from the eye-witness accounts of the crash as recorded at the Inquiry, this explanation would be inconsistent with how the plane behaved from the moment of take-off until the impact.[17] Wing Commander Falk, who as Chief Test Pilot at the R.A.E. Farnborough gave evidence at the Inquiry, has commented to the author on the heavy loading theory as follows: "My understanding is that the aircraft left the ground after a run which was not considered to be excessive, climbed to a low height and then levelled off. This was in no way abnormal. The aircraft then followed a steadily descending flight path until it hit the water. This behaviour does not seem to me to be consistent with gross overloading nor with the aircraft having been badly out of balance with the centre of gravity either too far forward or aft."[18]

A heavy load would nevertheless add substantially to the difficulty of a night-time take-off on a Liberator from the Gibraltar runway. And, because it would mean increasing the time keeping the plane at a low level while building up the speed necessary for its final climb, the margin for human error in carrying out this ma-

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noeuvre would be much reduced.[19] A theory of heavy loading, therefore, could be concomitant with those of error, as have been discussed.[20]

The evidence of the alleged jamming of the elevator controls has been set out in adequate detail in an earlier chapter. If this jamming had occurred, it was reasoned, it must logically have been induced either by some accident or by design. The "accident" theories included these: the cargo might have shifted against the cables; the controls might have been jammed by the retracting nose-wheel; a chain in the control cable system might have become derailed from its sprocket and wedged tight; the locking lever might unintentionally have been operated, or not properly released in the first place.

But for each of these accident theories, there was evidence to dismiss it, either from an examination of the control system, or of the locking pins, or from the eye-witnesses' evidence. Equally, the possibility that some foreign body might have been maliciously inserted in the cables, in such a way as to jam them at this stage, can also be ruled out, for even if such an obstruction had not been detected during the pilot's cockpit check, it would have been found during the subsequent investigation of the wreckage.

There is a further theory which circulated in air force circles soon after the Inquiry and which merits serious consideration. It suggested that a mailbag had fallen through the nose-wheel aperture during acceleration at take-off: that this mailbag had been caught in the nose-wheel retracting mechanism and that as the nose-wheel was retracted the mailbag was pressed against the controls and jammed them.

This theory is supported by the fact that the bomb-aimer's compartment in the nose of the aircraft had been converted into a small freight hold in which mailbags were stowed, and it is conceivable that, if the access hatch to this compartment were improperly secured, the bags could have slid back into the nose-wheel compartment. Commenting on this theory Wing Commander Falk has written to us:

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"After leaving the ground it would not be abnormal for a pilot to level off in order to gain speed before climbing. He would have selected 'undercarriage up' soon after leaving the ground and the time interval for the nose-wheel to be reaching the retracted position at the same time as the aircraft was accelerating in level flight after levelling off, seems to be of the right order.

"If the nose-wheel or nose-wheel mechanism fouled a mailbag and locked the controls so that the elevator was slightly down from the position required for level flight, the aircraft would follow the flight path described by witnesses."[21]

Considerable weight is added to this possible explanation by the fact of a mailbag having been found on the runway approximately 400 yards from the start of the plane's take-off run.[22] There can be no other explanation for this mailbag having been found where it was other than that it had somehow fallen off the plane. If a second mailbag was following roughly the same course as the first, then it might well have become entangled with the nose-wheel mechanism. It would not, however, have been found in the position by the salvage divers, because once the aircraft's hydraulic pressure had been released by the crash it would have been freed, and having been of soft material it would have been unlikely that it would have left marks of damage on the cables. Although the tests carried out on an identical Liberator included retracting the nose-wheel to see if its mechanism could interfere with the controls, there is no reference to the tests having provided for the contingency of an object having become entangled with the nose-wheel.

The Court showed great interest in the question of the mailbag on the runway and was concerned to try to establish how it had come to be there. Its first line of thought was that it had fallen through the rear hatch, but both Group Captain Bolland and Air Commodore Simpson testified that they would have noticed if this had been open at the time of take-off. Later in the Inquiry it emerged that at least some of the mailbags from Cairo had been stored in the port forward bomb bay, from which L.A.C. Titterington said he had removed seven. It was with this in mind that the Court questioned Squadron Leader Sach as to whether a mailbag could have fallen

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out of the port forward bomb bay door. To this Sach replied that it would only be possible if the bomb door were open as a result of putting on flap or for some other reason, and then only if the hydraulic system were not properly primed.

When Prchal was recalled, the subject of the mailbag was the first one put to him. Was the bomb door on Liberator AL523 connected to the hydraulic system? Prchal thought not, but that he could not be certain since it was his first trip in that aircraft. He was asked whether the Flight Engineer would have noticed if either the inside door or the bomb door had been open, and he replied that he would, since he had walked up and down the fuselage before reporting to Prchal that all was in order for take-off. This would seem to dispose of the possibility that the mailbag could have fallen out through the bomb door, and Prchal himself put forward the nose-wheel aperture theory as the most likely explanation for this unique occurrence: "If it were loaded in the nose it is possible for an article to fall out through the nose-wheel aperture if it is not secured."[23]

Where one mailbag had fallen out, another could easily have followed, and it can also be advanced in favour of the theory of a second mailbag becoming entangled with the retracting nose-wheel that the effects it would produce would be entirely consistent with Prchal's evidence at the Inquiry. ("I eased the control column forward to gather speed. My speed built up to 166 m.p.h. I wanted to climb again so attempted to pull back the control column but I could not do so. The control column was definitely locked. . . . When I found I was unable to move the control column I put on trim in an endeavour to gain height, but nothing happened. All this time I was pulling back on the control column but could not move it backwards.")

Against this theory, one has to make the reservation that there is no evidence that a second mailbag *had* fallen away from the plane and neither is there any evidence to show where in fact all the mailbags were stowed. Even if it were available, it is possible that in view of the large quantities of private luggage taken aboard at the last moment – the personal baggage,[24] the cases of drink and so forth[25] – that the loading was to some extent re-arranged by the Flight Engi-

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neer during the long wait at the end of the runway, in order that the aircraft's trim should not be upset. And a second reservation must arise from the Mason-Macfarlane papers, in which the absence of this theory suggests either that it was considered and rejected by his immediate R.A.F. officers or that for some reason it was not given sufficient credence to reach this senior level.[26]

While collecting the material for this book the author has failed to obtain the close co-operation of Mr Edward Prchal, and is therefore not qualified to express an appreciation of him. It is with gratitude, therefore, that we turn for comment to Wing Commander Roland Falk: "On reading Prchal's statements in the Court of Inquiry and the comments made about him by those who knew him well, the impression I gained of him at the time is reinforced. I believe him to have been a very good pilot who answered the questions put to him honestly and to the best of his ability. If inconsistencies have been found in comments he has been reported to have made over a long period, I do not think that this in any way indicates dishonesty. I feel sure that he did not know the cause of the crash but was always trying to explain it to himself.

"What does matter is the honesty with which he made his statements at the time and I cannot find any cause to doubt this in any of his comments which appear in the report of the Inquiry."[27]

"i feel sure that he did not know the cause of the crash," writes the expert witness. And the Inquiry concluded: "The cause of the accident was, in the opinion of the Court, due to the aircraft becoming uncontrollable for reasons which cannot be established." We are left with one observation that we are entitled to make: that these words of the Court strip authority from its acceptance that the elevator controls jammed and from its assertion "there is no question of sabotage."

The mystery remains therefore: what caused the crash in which Sikorski died?

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Notes and Sources

1: "Soldiers Must Die"

1. *The Times*, July 9, 1943; Reuter, quoted by *Irish Independent*, July 9, 1943; and *Gibraltar Chronicle*, July 8, 1943.

2. Broadcast by Mr Winston Churchill to Poland, July 14, 1943. (Quoted in *Poland and the British Parliament*, vol. III, Pilsudski Institute, New York, p. 236.)

3. *The Times*, July 6, 1943; *Gibraltar Chronicle*, July 6, 1943.

4. Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs to all foreign missions in Moscow, January 6, 1949, published in *Documents on Polish-Soviet Relations 1939–1945*, vol. I, *1939–1943* (General Sikorski Historical Institute, London, 1961), p. 260. Cited below as *DPSR*.

5. Ambassador Kot to Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov, January 9,1942, *DPSR*, p. 261.

6. Soviet Foreign Ministry to Polish Embassy in U.S.S.R., January 9, 1942, *DPSR*, p. 263. Soviet Foreign Ministry to Polish Embassy in U.S.S.R., January 17, 1942, *DPSR*, p. 266.

7. For a clear exposition of the significance of the Curzon Line, see Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* (HMSO, 1962), footnote p. 201. In July 1920 Lord Curzon had proposed that the Polish forces should withdraw to this line at a time when the war with Russia was running against them. The Poles

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had shown willing, but the Russians had then refused, only to suffer subsequently such a severe reverse at the hands of the Poles that the frontier finally agreed between Russia and Poland at the Treaty of Riga eight months later was further to the east than the Curzon Line they had originally scorned.

8. Conversation between General Sikorski and Sir Stafford Cripps, January 26, 1949, *DPSR*, pp. 269–71.

9. Conversation between General Sikorski and Mr Churchill, January 31, 1942, *DPSR*, pp. 274–6.

10. Report by Counsellor Weese, March 5, 1942, *DPSR*, p. 286.

11. The Atlantic Charter, signed by Roosevelt and Churchill on August 12, 1941, had laid down that their countries sought no aggrandisement, territorial or other; and "they desire to see no territorial changes that do not accord with the freely expressed wishes of the people concerned." It was subsequently signed by both Poland and the Soviet Union as well.

12. Churchill to Roosevelt, March 7, 1942; Churchill to Stalin, March 9, 1942; Woodward, *op. cit.*, p. 193. Conversation between Sikorski, Churchill and Mr Eden and others, March 11, 1942, *DPSR*, pp. 295–9.

13. At one stage in his conversation with Sikorski on January 31,1942, Mr Churchill had stated that Britain was not afraid of communism: should Europe accept communism, Britain would not oppose it. See note 9.

14. Conversation between Sikorski and President Roosevelt, March 24, 1942, *DPSR*, p. 310.

15. Count Raczynski to Eden, April 13, 1942, *DPSR*, p. 321. Eden to Raczynski, April 17,1942, *DPSR*, p. 329.

16. Conference between Sikorski and Eden, June 8, 1942, *DPSR*, p. 364.

17. Conversation between Sikorski and Churchill, August 30, 1942, *DPSR*, p. 428. Woodward, *op. cit.* p. 193.

18. Raczynski to Ambassador Bogomolov, January 28, 1942, *DPSR*, p. 271.

19. Bogomolov to Raczynski, March 13, 1942, *DPSR*, p. 300.

20. Raczynski to Bogomolov, April 20, 1943, *DPSR*, p. 529.

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21. This diary fragment is printed ("Katyn File No. 0490") in *The Crime of Katyn, Facts and Documents*, published by Polish Cultural Foundation, London, 1965, pp. 189–90.

22. Soviet Foreign Ministry to Polish Embassy in U.S.S.R., January 16, 1943, *DPSR*, p. 474.

23. German Foreign Office archives. There are three files relating to Polish-Russian relations during this period: Serial 1256, "Poland and Russia November 1940 to March 1944" (N.A.R.S. Microfilm T-120, Roll 752); Serial 1327, "Political Relations between Poland and Russia" (T-120, Roll 404); and Serial 8464, "Military Affairs, Poland," which is only a folder containing misfiled records on non-Polish matters. The passages quoted come from a very useful and lengthy 1944 survey of Polish Government statements, prepared by the German Foreign Office. It is on Frames 352028–352107 of T-120, Roll 404. In this instance, the passages were monitored by the Germans from B.B.C. broadcasts.

24. Raczynski to Eden, February 23, 1943, *DPSR*, p. 487.

25. German Foreign Office archives. Also in *DPSR*, p. 501.

26. At the time, the Soviet Union had rejected the Curzon Line. See note 7.

27. Communiqué of Polish Telegraph Agency, March 1, 1943, *DPSR*, p. 502.

28. House of Commons, *Official Report* (Hansard), vol. 373, col. 1504, July 30, 1941.

29. Robert E. Sherwood, *The White House Papers of Harry L. Hopkins* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1949), vol. II, pp. 706–7.

30. Note in *DPSR*, pp. 606–7. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. IV, *The Hinge of Fate* (Cassell, 1951). Sherwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 710–714.

31. General Sikorski had studied at Lvov. It is now part of the Soviet Union.

32. Eden spoke to Raczynski about the *Lvov* issue on January 22, 1943, and later to Sikorski; Sikorski finally gave way and agreed to name the cruiser *Gdansk* instead. Robert E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, (Harper and Bros., New York, 1948), vol. II, pp. 708–714. Cf. Herbert Peis, *Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin*, p. 122. And Sir Llewellyn

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Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* (HMSO, 1961), p. 203fn.

33. The two professors were Lange and Karpinsky. The broadcast was quoted in German Foreign Office file, as cited in note 23.

34. Swiss newspapers. Cf. *Basler Nachrichten*, the (anti-German) newspaper of Basle, April 12, 1943.

35. Roosevelt to Sikorski, April 12,1943. Published in *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers 1943*, vol. III, p. 373. Cited below as *FRUS*.

36. German White Book, "Amtliches Material zum Massenmord von Katyn. Im Auftrag des A.A. auf Grund urkundlichen Beweismaterials zusammengestellt, bearbeitet und herausgegeben von der deutschen Informationsstelle, 1943." See note 21.

37. Communiqué broadcast by Berlin radio, April 13, 1943. *DPSR*, p. 523.

38. Note in *DPSR*, p. 609.

39. *Soviet War News*, April 17, 1943, *DPSR*, p. 524. Cf. United Press, April 16,1943; *Basler Nachrichten*, April 16, 1943; *FRUS*, p. 379.

40. Ambassador Drexel Biddle (U.S.) to Secretary of State, April 17, 1943, *FRUS*, p. 379.

41. "London Day by Day," *Daily Telegraph*, July 6, 1943.

42. Diary of General Sikorski, April 15, 1943. This extremely valuable document was kept from day to day by whichever adjutant was with Sikorski; it was made available, like many other Polish documents cited in this book, by the General Sikorski Historical Institute, London. Cf. Reuter, April 16, 1943.

43. Churchill, vol. IV, p. 679. Cf. Woodward, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

44. Conversation between Sikorski, Churchill, Raczynski (in Polish, unpublished), April 15, 1943. Cf. Raczynski, *W sojuszniczym Londynie* (London, 1960), p. 171fn.

45. Biddle to Secretary of State, April 17, 1943, *FRUS*, pp. 380–1.

46. Communiqué by Polish Ministry of National Defence, April 16, 1943, *DPSR*, pp. 525–7. Reuter, April 16, 1943, quoted in *Basler Nachrichten*, April 17–18, 1943.

47. Biddle to Secretary of State, April 17, 1943, *FRUS*, p. 379.

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48. In October, November and December 1941; in January, March and May 1942; and repeatedly thereafter.

49. Biddle to Secretary of State, April 23, 1943, *FRUS*, p. 387.

50. Published diary of Dr Joseph Goebbels, April 17, 1943.

51. *Basler Nachrichten*, April 19, 1943.

52. Polish Government statement, London, April 17, 1943, *DPSR*, pp. 527–8; cf, *FRUS*, pp. 381–2.

53. *Pravda*, Moscow, April 19, 1943; quoted in *Basler Nachrichten*, April 20, 1943.

54. Exchange, Moscow, 21st April 1943. Quoted in *Basler Nachrichten*, April 21, 1943.

55. Stalin to Churchill, April 21, 1943, *DPSR*, pp. 530–1; Stalin to Roosevelt, April 21, 1943, *FRUS*, p. 391.

56. Statement by German-controlled Europa Press Agency, Warsaw, April 22, 1943, published in *Basler Nachrichten*, April 24–25, 1943. By this time the British Press had ceased to mention the Katyn massacre.

57. Churchill to Stalin, April 24, 1943, *DPSR*, p. 532; cf. *FRUS*, p. 393.

58. Biddle to Secretary of State, April 27, 1943, *FRUS*, pp. 398–400.

59. Churchill to Stalin, April 25, 1943, *DPSR*, pp. 534–5; cf. *FRUS*, p. 393. The administrative technique used to suppress an inconvenient newspaper during the war in England was the revocation of its Ministry of Supply paper licence. This happened to the Gaullist newspaper *La Marseillaise* on July 7, 1943; the Ministry of Information also refused permission for further publication. A number of Polish newspapers in London were suppressed in the autumn of 1943, after Sikorski's death. (*The Times*, July 7; and information from General Sikorski Historical Institute.)

60. See in particular Woodward, *op. cit.*, p. 204fn, for an examination of the reasons why the Foreign Office was at the time not sure that the Germans were telling the truth. Telegram Winant (U.S. Ambassador in London) to Secretary of State, April 21, 1943, *FRUS*, p. 385.

61. Memorandum of telephone conversation by Mr Elbridge

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Burbrow, April 26, 1943, *FRUS*, p. 396.

62. *Collier's National Weekly*, April 3,1943. Reports of Sikorski's speeches in New York, in Pilsudski Institute files, New York.

63. Communiqué issued by International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, April 1943, *DPSR*, p. 531; quoted in *Basler Nachrichten*, April 24, 1943.

64. Report by Mr Harold Ring, Reuter's special correspondent in Moscow, April 29, 1943.

65. A Congressional Select Committee to Conduct an Investigation of the Facts, Evidence and Circumstances of the Katyn Forest Massacre, held hearings between October 1951 and November 1952 and its 2,362 page report was published by the U.S. Government Printing Office in 1952. The Committee concluded that "the Soviet N.K.V.D. was responsible." (See also letter in *The Times*, October 17, 1966.)

66. Churchill, vol. IV. pp. 678–81.

67. Molotov to Ambassador Romer, Moscow, April 25, 1943, *DPSR*, pp. 533–4. Note from Romer to Molotov, April 26, 1943, *DPSR*, pp. 535–6.

68. *Basler Nachrichten* April 27, 1943.

69. *Ibid.*, April 28, 1943.

70. This remarkable document of the Polish Underground movement has never been published before and this alone justifies its inclusion in full in this book. It establishes at once that the Polish resistance was aware of the dangers of the German propaganda about Katyn. The "poster" is reported in *Abwehr* files, on uncatalogued N.A.R.S. Microfilm T-77, Roll 1,443, frames 919–920.

71. Diary of Dr Goebbels, April 27 and 28, 1943.

72. Himmler to Ribbentrop, April 22, 1943. The S.S. file containing this correspondence is on N.A.R.S. Microfilm T-175, Roll 73.

73. Gauleiter S.S.-Gruppenführer Bohle (Leiter der Auslands-organisation der N.S.D.A.P.) to Reichsführer-S.S. Himmler, April 14,1943.

74. Ribbentrop to Himmler, April 26, 1943.

75. This statement is based on examination of both the Himmler and the S.S. files, and on the closed 80 linear feet of R.S.H.A. files

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currently being processed at N.A.R.S. by Mr Wolfe and Mr Spencer at Alexandria, Virginia. There is one other S.S. file on Katyn, containing photographs and plans of the mass graves as they were discovered and exhumed, dated 1944. (N.A.R.S. Microfilm T-175, Roll 199.) In general on Katyn see: the paper, *Katyn – ein Geheimnis?* published in *Vierteljahresheft für Zeitgeschichte*, 1955, p. 405; U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, October 1952; and Manuscript No. A.917 of the U.S. Army Historical Division, The Truth about Katyn, written by Major-General R. von Gersdorff, who directed the exhumation operations.

76. German Embassy, Paris, telegram No. 2,711 to Berlin, May 1, 1943. The two Poles were the Warsaw philosopher Professor Tarlo Mazynski and Engineer Wincenty Jastrebski, the former Polish Finance Minister, born in Mlava (N.A.R.S. Microfilm T-120, Roll 404, frame 352037).

77. Under-Secretary of State Hencke to German Embassy in Paris, telegram No. 119, May 6, 1943.

78. Memorandum by Hencke, Berlin, May 22, 1943.

79. *Basler Nachrichten*, April 28, 1943.

80. Standley (U.S. Ambassador in Moscow) to Secretary of State, April 28, 1943, *FRUS*, pp. 400–2.

81. Standley to Secretary of State, April 14,1943, *FRUS*, p. 374.

82. Churchill to Stalin, April 30, 1943, *DPSR*, pp. 539–40.

83. Biddle to Secretary of State, May 2, 1943, *FRUS*, p. 405.

84. Churchill to Stalin, April 30, 1943, *DPSR*, pp. 539–40.

85. Woodward, *op. cit.*, pp. 204, 205fn.

86. Conversation with Sikorski, as reported by Biddle to Secretary of State, May 1, 1943, *FRUS*, pp. 403–4. There is a lengthy note on the Sikorski-Eden conversation in the files of the General Sikorski Historical Institute.

87. German Foreign Office archives.

88. Sikorski to Roosevelt, May 4, 1943, *FRUS*, p. 411.

89. Stalin to Churchill, May 4, 1943, *Correspondence*, vol. I, p. 128.

90. Secretary of State to Biddle, June 16, 1943, *FRUS*, p. 431.

91. Standley to Secretary of State, recording his joint views with Clark Kerr, June 18, 1943, *FRUS*, p. 432.

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92. Conversation with Bogomolov, reported by Biddle to Under-Secretary of State (Mr Sumner Welles), June 2, 1943, *FRUS*, p. 426.

93. Biddle to Secretary of State, May 15, 1943, *FRUS*, p. 420.

94. Churchill to Stalin, May 12, 1943, *Correspondence*, vol. I, p. 139.

95. Eden told this to Winant. Winant to Secretary of State, May 12,1943, *FRUS*, p. 419.

96. Sikorski to Churchill, 24th May 1943 (unpublished, in English).

2: Six Weeks too Soon

1. Professor Komarnicki and Minister Seyda to General Sikorski (in Polish), May 11, 1943. Reproduced facsimile on pages 46–47 above [printed edition only].

2. Quoted in *The Guardian*, May 5, 1967. There is no apparent reference to this in either of Strumph-Wojtkiewicz's two books: *Sikorski ijego zolnierze* and *Gwiazda Wladyslawa Sikorskiego*, both published in Warsaw in 1946; but in the latter, the author talks of having advised Mme. Lesniowska against making the trip.

3. Diary of General Sikorski, May 24, 1943.

4. Interview of General Marian Kukiel, broadcast in Radio Free Europe programme "Katastrofa lotnicza w Gibraltarze," April 3, 1962.

5. Liberator AL523 was one of 139 LB-30 type aircraft built under contract No. F-677 for the British Purchasing Commission; it was accepted on February 9, 1941, at the San Diego factory, and entered service in the R.A.F. in November of that year, in Coastal Command. Officially termed the Consolidated Vultee model 32 Liberator, B-24C, it was designated Liberator II by the R.A.F. Its sister aircraft was AL504 ("Commando"), the famous plane which flew Mr Churchill. (Correspondence with General Dynamics, Convair Division; *Jane's All the World's Aircraft*, 1945/6 [Sampson Low, 1946]; *Aircraft of the Royal Air Force since 1918* [Putnam, 1957]; *Aircraft of the Fighting Powers*, vol. VI, 1945; *British Military Aircraft Serials, 1912–1963* [Ian Allan, 1964]).

6. Diary of General Sikorski, May 24, 1943.

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7. General Mason-Macfarlane's appointments book, entries of May 24 – 25, 1943.

8. Sworn affidavit of Lieutenant Ludwik Lubienski, December 9, 1943.

9. Letter to the author from Minister Karol Popiel, Rome, June 1967. He wrote the episode down in his personal diary which was confiscated when he emigrated from Poland in October 1947. That the telephone call did take place has been confirmed to me by Mr Tadeusz Ullmann, interviewed in New York, May 1967. He heard of this and the parallel telephone calls to Mikolajczyk and Modelski at the time, first-hand. Jerzy Klimkowski also refers to this episode in his book, which has not however been used as a source in writing this account. He assigns the wrong date to the episode, also.

10. Diary of General Erwin Lahousen, U.S. Army G-2 documents, on N.A.R.S. Microfilm (Special film), April 28, May 6, May 25, July 2 and July 6, 1941.

11. *Ibid.*, August 19, 1941, February 23, March 6, March 11, 1942.

12. *Ibid.*, September 9, 1942.

13. *Ibid.*, June 1, 1943.

14. *Ibid.*, June 4, and June 7, 1943. On June 21, 1943, Colonel Baron von Freytag Loringhoven arrived to prepare to take over as head of *Abwehr II*, while Lahousen transferred to a front-line command. He formally took up his new duty on August 1, 1943. General Lahousen was travelling in the South of France on July 41943, and there are no entries in his diary from June 26, to July 5, 1943.

15. Statement by Professor Kot quoted in *Daily Telegraph*, July 1943.

16. *New York Times* July 6, 1943.

17. Information from General Marian Kukiel of the General Sikorski Historical Institute.

18. *The Times*, obituary, July 6, 1943.

19. Radio Moscow broadcast, monitored by German Foreign Office.

20. Sikorski received the letter in Beirut, says *The Times*, July 6, 1943. Letter, Roosevelt to Sikorski, June 7, 1943, *FRUS*, p. 427.

21. Speech reported by Exchange, London, July 7, 1943.

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22. Extracts from *O.N.I. Weekly*, issued by the Chief of Naval Intelligence, Washington, D.C., pp. 1,917, 1,944, 1,955.

23. German Foreign Office archives.

24. Interview of General Anders: broadcast in R.F.E. programme, April 23, 1962 (see note 4).

25. Interview of Minister Tadeusz Zazulinski, broadcast by R.F.E. on April 23, 1962 (see note 4).

26. Text of telegram from Churchill to Sikorski, June 29, 1943, quoted in letter from Cabinet Office, August 22, 1967. It was referred to by Klimkowski, who learned of it first hand; and by Zazulinski in his broadcast (see note 25). He said: "On the following day [June 30] the British High Commissioner brought in person a telegram from Churchill, informing him [Sikorski] that he was impatiently awaited in London." In General Sikorski's diary it is paraphrased: ". . . Lord Moyne delivers to the C.-in-C. a telegram from Churchill, who congratulates the C.-in-C. on the achievements of his journey and expresses a desire to meet him soon in Downing-street." It is clear that the Poles read it as a somewhat impatient recall. R. G. Casey (later Lord Casey) was Resident Minister of State in the Middle East 1942–43.

27. No. 511 Squadron Operations Records Book; and maintenance records kept by Sergeant N. J. Moore.

28. *The Times* Index, April-June 1943.

29. *Basler Nachrichten*, July 1, 1943.

30. *Ibid.*, July 2, 1943.

31. *The Times*, July 6, 1943.

32. Interview of Mr Zygmunt Lytinski, broadcast by R.F.E. on April 23, 1962 (see note 4).

33. Interview of Minister Tadeusz Zazulinski (see note 25).

34. Affidavit by Lubienski, December 9, 1943 (see note 8).

35. Interview of General Anders (see note 24).

3: Farce and Tragedy

1. Interview between Ludwik Lubienski and Herr Rolf Hochhuth, Munich, February 1967.

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2. Interview of Mr A. J. Perry (A.D.C. to General Mason-Macfarlane), June 1967.

3. Affidavit by Lubienski, December 9, 1943: "The Governor of Gibraltar was on very friendly terms with General Sikorski, and he was kindly disposed towards Poland. . . . He was very anti-Russian in his outlook." Also, Mr Anthony Quayle (Governor's Military Assistant) quoted in letter to Hochhuth, January 1967.

4. Affidavit by Lubienski, December 9, 1943. Mason-Macfarlane's appointments book for July 3 shows Maisky's arrival on the morning of that day, then an arrow leading over to July 4, with the word "breakfast" written after it.

5. Interview of Quayle, New York, May 1967. Mason-Macfarlane Papers, *passim*.

6. Interview of Lubienski, February 1967. No. 511 Squadron O.R.B. This document states that there were "12" passengers on the Cairo-Gibraltar leg of the journey, but it does not give any cargo weight.

7. Mason-Macfarlane's Report, quoted partially in R.F.E. broadcast, April 23, 1962. Diary of General Sikorski, July 3, 1943.

8. Testimony of Pilot Officer R. V. Briggs, July 1943, before the Court of Inquiry; he was officer of the No. 27 A.D.R.U. at Gibraltar.

9. The ten passengers were: General Wladyslaw Sikorski, Polish Prime Minister and C.-in-C.; Major-General Tadeusz Klimecki, Chief of Polish General Staff; Colonel Andrzej Marecki, Chief of Operations Staff; Lieutenant Jozef Ponikiewski, naval A.D.C.; Mr Adam Kulakowski, Sikorski's personal secretary; Mme. Zofia Lesniowska, Chief of Polish Women's Auxiliary; Colonel Victor Cazalet, M.P., British liaison officer; Brigadier J. P. Whiteley, M.P.; "Mr W. H. Lock," and "Mr Pinder," officially listed as "civilians." Discussion of their possible occupations follows later. For a list of the crew, see Chapter VI, note 1.

10. Interview with Mr R. V. Briggs, June 1967.

11. All the surviving N.C.O.s of this unit have been interviewed by this author. Sergeant Moore in June, 1967; Corporal W. A. L. Davis and Corporal F. E. Hopgood also in June 1967. Corporal Alexander was killed when his plane was lost returning from Gibraltar.

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12. Testimony of Sergeant N. J. Moore, July 1943.

13. On one point there is a minor discrepancy in the testimony of these men before the Court of Inquiry later held. Moore stated: "I then ordered Corporal Davis, senior corporal of my maintenance party, to put a guard on the aircraft immediately; this he did and this airman remained on guard until relieved by a military armed guard." Davis stated: "He [Moore] detailed me to have the aircraft guarded continuously by one of our maintenance detachment, and stated further that one of them would have to sleep in the aircraft at night." But Captain Jack Williams, who was in charge of the military guard provided for Liberator AL523, stated that his guard mounted duty at 6.30 P.M. and remained there until the aircraft left. It is thus not clear whether the R.A.F. guard was only a stopgap, or in addition to the Army sentry.

14. Testimony of Corporal W. A. L. Davis, July 9, 1943.

15. Interviews of Moore and Hopgood, June 1967.

16. General Sir N. M. Mason-Macfarlane's Record, July 18, 1945. This invaluable document was found amongst a pile of manuscript notes preserved by his daughter, Mrs John B. Hall, Galashiels. The reason why he should have sat down, two years after the event, at the height of his brilliant General Election campaign against Brendan Bracken and Churchill, to write this document will probably never be known.

17. Report (Polish) by Lubienski to the Polish authorities in London, written between July 13 and July 20, 1943, probably July 15.

18. Diary of General Sikorski, July 3, 1943.

19. Lubienski's Report, July 1943.

20. Telegram CO/5255, despatched by Governor of Gibraltar, 1.30 A.M., July 4, 1943. Cf *FRUS*, p. 437.

21. Interview of Mr William Bailey, OBE, DSC, GM, Lisbon, May 1967. Bailey was on duty in the harbour that night.

22. Report logged in German Naval Staff War Diary, July 3 and 4, 1943, under heading "*Feindlage Mittelmeer*."

23. Interview of Lubienski, February 1967.

24. Interview of Lubienski, New York, May 1967. In his December 1943 affidavit, Lubienski stated that he made three trips to the

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aircraft during the night.

25. Mason-Macfarlane's Record, July 18, 1945. Also, letter from Ivan Maisky to Hochhuth, December 1966.

26. Report of Court of Inquiry, part I.

27. Interview of Lubienski, May 1967.

28. Letter, Tynan to Hochhuth, January 1967. Interview of Quayle, May 1967.

29. Mason-Macfarlane's Record, July 18, 1945.

30. Lubienski's Report, July 1943.

31. Diary of General Sikorski, July 4, 1943.

32. Quoted by Lubienski, who knows this passage well, in R.F.E. broadcast; and repeated during interviews of him in February and May 1967.

33. Interview of Lubienski, February 1967.

34. Testimony of Briggs, July 1943.

35. Interview of Quayle, May 1967.

36. *Gibraltar Chronicle*, July 6, July 8, 1943. Lubienski's Report, July 1943. General Sikorski's diary, July 4, 1943.

37. Lubienski's Report, July 1943.

38. *Ibid.*.

39. Mason-Macfarlane's Record, July 18, 1945. Also his appointments book, July 4, 1943.

40. From an untitled manuscript on Gibraltar in the Mason-Macfarlane Papers, ca. 1950.

41. Interview of Lubienski, February 1967; Mason-Macfarlane's appointments book, July 4, 1943.

42. Lubienski's Report, July 1943.

43. Mason-Macfarlane's Record, July 18, 1945.

44. *Daily Telegraph*, July 6, 1943.

45. Interview of Perry, June 1967.

46. *The Times* obituary, July 6, 1943.

47. Interview of Lubienski, February 1967.

48. Lubienski's Report, July 1943.

49. Interview of Moore, July 1967.

50. Testimony of Moore to the Court of Inquiry, July 1943. It can be noted that the fact that a bed had been installed in the Liberator

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was not disclosed in the Court's proceedings.

51. Maintenance notes of No. 511 Squadron's Gibraltar detachment. There is no surviving record of the total quantity of fuel uplifted by AL523 on July 4, 1943.

52. Interview of Perry, June 1967.

53. Interview of Group Captain Guy Bolland, April 1967.

54. Mason-Macfarlane's Record, July 18, 1945.

55. *Ibid.*.

56. *Ibid.*.

57. A.P. (Air Publication) 1182, vol. 1: *Safety Harness* (Service Procedure and Regulations) para. 28. Air Ministry manuals and regulations.

58. Interview of Quayle, May 1967.

59. Interview of Lubienski, February 1967; Mason-Macfarlane's Record, July 18, 1945; interview of Quayle, May 1967.

60. Mason-Macfarlane's notes on Gibraltar (see note 40) and interview with Bolland, May 1967.

61. This is the procedure as laid down in *Pilot Training Manual – B-24 – the Liberator*, October 1944, vol. 4. The September 1942 version is similar.

62. Mason-Macfarlane's Record, July 18, 1945.

63. Interviews of Bolland, April 1967; of Lubienski, February and May 1967; and of Quayle, May 1967.

64. Interview of Quayle, May 1967.

65. Interviews of Lubienski, February and May 1967.

66. Interview of Quayle, May 1967.

67. Interviews of Lubienski, February and May 1967.

68. Mason-Macfarlane's Record, July 18, 1945.

4: Search and Inquire

1. Testimony of Flight Lieutenant Albert Posgate, July 1943. Although No. 71 Air/Sea Rescue Unit must surely have kept an Operations Record Book at the time, it cannot now be traced.

2. Testimony of Group Captain G. A. Bolland, July 8, 1943.

3. Testimony of A.C.1 Derek Qualtrough, July 10, 1943. Inter-

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view of Mr D. Qualtrough, June 1967. Testimony of L.A.C. Eric Howes (who, however, claimed to have "seen" the aircraft afloat for 6–8 minutes after "hearing" the crash). Testimony of Posgate, July 1943.

4. Testimony of Posgate, recalled some days later, July 1943. Swimmers were in fact sent out at first light on July 5, 1943 to collect all the secret and diplomatic mail floating in the sea. (Interviews of Mr Donald Darling and Dr Dudley Heath, July 1967.)

5. Interview of Mason-Macfarlane's daughter, Mrs John B. Hall, March 1967.

6. Interviews of Lubienski, February and May 1967.

7. Testimony of Wing Commander Claude Dunkerley, R.A.F. North Front, Gibraltar, July 10, 1943.

8. Cable to Colonial Office is reported in *Flight*, July 8, 1943; and in *Evening News* (London), July 5, 1943.

9. Interview of Lubienski, February 1967, and of Quayle, May 1967; Lubienski's Report, July 1943. Lubienski cabled Colonel Borkowski, Sikorski's *chef de cabinet* in London, via the War Office: "Most deeply regret to have to inform you that the aircraft taking General Sikorski back to United Kingdom from Gibraltar crashed into the sea at 3.00 hours on taking off. General Sikorski and all his staff were killed including Mme Lesniowska, General Klimecki, Colonel Marecki, M. Kulakowski, Lt. Ponikiewski, Colonel Cazalet, Colonel [sic] Gralewski, courier from Warsaw. Body of General Sikorski has been recovered. The other bodies still await identification. I will send further details as soon as available. I beg at the same time to express my profound grief in sending to you this news which is so cruel a tragedy for our people and for our country." (Liaison Officer, Gibraltar [Lubienski] to War Office, London: Most Secret, July 5, 1943.)

10. Mason-Macfarlane's cable read: "In my own name and that of all in Gibraltar, I beg to offer you deepest and sincerest consolations over the tragic accident to General Sikorski and his party." (Mason-Macfarlane to President of Polish Republic, July 5, 1943. No. P./239/43.) The Polish President replied, "I wish to thank your Excellency and all in Gibraltar for your warm words of sympathy in

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Poland's bereavement." (*Gibraltar Chronicle*.) For the text of King George VI's telegram, see *The Times*, July 6, 1943.

11. Air Ministry Communiqué: bulletin No. 10,796, July 5, 1943.

12. Bulletin No. 16 of July 5, 1943.

13. Biddle to Roosevelt, Secretary of State and Under-Secretary of State, twelve noon, July 5, 1943, *FRUS*, p. 437fn.

14. Testimony of Sumner Welles in Congressional Hearings, *The Katyn Forest Massacre*, p. 2,080. The death of Sikorski was also mourned in official Soviet newspapers. *Izvestia* (July 9, 1943) called him "this great Polish statesman and military leader."

15. Mason-Macfarlane's Record, July 18, 1945. Cf. letter Maisky to Hochhuth, December 27, 1966: "We landed in Cairo at seven A.M., where the British Consulate's representative collected me. He drove me to breakfast with Lord Killearn. After this breakfast, Lord Killearn told me the news of Sikorski's death. At that time, Lord Killearn knew nothing in detail of the circumstances, he just said that Sikorski's plane had crashed into the sea."

16. Captain C. H. Lush, C.B.E. (Ret.)

17. Interview of Mr J. A. H. Horton, August 1967. He is emphatic that there were no 10–shilling or £5 notes among the money. No satisfactory explanation can be offered for its presence on the plane. It was certainly the first and only time that money was ever found after a Gibraltar plane crash, according to Horton. It has not been possible to establish whether these notes were genuine or not. There was a great quantity of counterfeit British currency being produced by the Germans at this time. It was reported in August 1967 that five million pounds in such forgeries had been discovered in an organ in a church in Northern Italy. This is also based on a day-by-day report endorsed: "Enclosure to V.A.C.N.A.'s No. 2804/3505 dated August 13, 1943" and entitled: "Report of Salvage of Crashed Liberator Aircraft," which will be cited below as Salvage Report.

18. A remarkable photograph taken of the underwater wreckage on this day is reproduced on the cover.

19. Testimony of Wing Commander Arthur Stevens, Gibraltar R.A.F. station's Chief Technical Officer, July 1943.

20. Interview of Dr Daniel Canning, June 1967. Testimony of

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Squadron Leader Daniel Canning (Chief Medical Officer, R.A.F. Gibraltar), July 19, 1943.

21. Interview of Quayle, who formally identified Sikorski, May 1967.

22. The relevant passage of the R.A.F.'s regulations on safety harness read: "The pilot will ensure that each occupant of an aeroplane which is fitted with safety belts and/or parachute harness attachments is conversant with the approved method of securing himself to and detaching himself from the aeroplane." To this the R.A.F. Flying Regulations added: "Occupants of aircraft . . . are to be properly secured during take-off." A.P.1182, vol. I: Safety Harness (Service Procedure and Regulations). A.P.1640(E) Flying Regulations for the R.A.F. (Safety Belts and Harness Attachments), 1943 edition.

23. Sikorski's uniform jacket was found floating in the sea and is on display in the General Sikorski Historical Institute in London.

24. Interviews of Lubienski, February and May 1967. Affidavit of Lubienski, December 1943.

25. The Spanish Customs authorities at La Linea were paid £60 Customs dues on the six zinc-lined coffins purchased in Algeciras (letter, British Vice-Consul in Algeciras to the Hon. Colonial Secretary, Gibraltar, No. 246/43, undated, in Governor's files, Gibraltar).

26. Interview of Quayle, May 1967.

27. Lubienski's Report, July 1943; interview of Lubienski, May 1967.

28. *Basler Nachrichten*, July 6 and 7, 1943.

29. *Ibid.*, July 6, 1943.

30. *The Times*, July 6, 1943. *Gibraltar Chronicle*, July 6, 1943.

31. Lubienski's Report, July 1943.

32. B.B.C. Monitoring Report No. 1,449, July 6, 1943. This confidential digest describes the German propaganda of July 5, 1943 at very considerable length. The parts quoted are from German broadcasts N.P.D. at 4.50 P.M., D.N.B. at 3.40 P.M., and from English-language broadcasts from Calais at 9.30 P.M. and 6.30 P.M. Cf. also *Daily Telegraph* and *New York Times*, July 6, 1943.

33. Exchange Telegraph, July 5, 1943. *Basler Nachrichten*, July 6, 1943.

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34. All German Foreign Office files relating to Poland have been scrutinised for this period of the war.

35. U.S. Navy chart, Strait of Gibraltar, updated to February 1942. With details of tidal information and currents.

36. Major S. Dudzinski's "Report in connection with the air accident of General Sikorski in Gibraltar," Polish Air Force Inspectorate-General, September 6, 1943 (in Polish); cited below as Dudzinski's Report.

37. Marshall Pugh, *Commander Crabb*, Macmillan, 1956.

38. Interview of Bailey, May 1967.

39. Pugh, *op. cit.*, p. 58, has a similar version. According to Mr Arthur Ralph Thorpe, Bailey's Chief Petty Officer at the time, they were asked to search for a box containing Sikorski's secret papers. (Interview of August 1967.)

40. Interview of Ludwik Lubienski, May 1967. In his testimony, Posgate stated: "[The body] of Colonel Cazalet was fully clothed and still strapped to his chair. In my opinion, Colonel Cazalet could not have been wearing a Mae West or parachute harness at the time of the crash."

41. Interview of Perry, June 1967.

42. House of Commons, *Official Report* (Hansard) vol. 390, cols. 1,946–1,950. Cf. also House of Lords, *Official Report*, vol. 128, cols. 219–220. *Basler Nachrichten*, July 8, 1943. *The Times*, July 6, 1943. Herbert Peis, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

43. The letter read: "I was deeply grieved to hear this morning of the death of your gallant husband and of that of your daughter on their way back from their memorable visit to the Middle East. No words of mine can ease the pain of this double loss. Nevertheless, I trust you will accept my sympathy with you in the death of one who was a personal friend of mine. The loss of General Sikorski is a tragic blow for the Polish people, whose cause he has served so faithfully and with so much courage. It will be profoundly felt in the wider sphere throughout the United Nations and in particular in this country, where he was the trusted friend and comrade-in-arms. With the deepest sympathy, believe me, Yours very sincerely, Winston S. Churchill." Published in pamphlet, *Leader of a Nation at War: The*

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Posthumous Homage of "The Voice of Poland" (Glasgow, 1943).

44. Dudzinski's Report, September 1943.

45. Salvage Report. Testimony of Wing Commander Stevens, July 1943.

46. Interviews of Dr Dudley Heath, June 1967. This fact was also hinted at by Bailey, the Diving Officer, who told this author (May 1967) how uneasy his divers were when told to look for Mme. Lesniowska. On July 6, Reuter reported that Mme Lesniowska's body had been found.

47. Salvage Report. Lubienski's report, July 1943, states: "The Governor was personally very interested in and concerned about the rescue operations, especially as he wanted the body of Mme. Lesniowska to be found."

48. The recovery of the daughter's suitcases was witnessed by Stevens (interviewed June 1967).

49. Mason-Macfarlane's appointments book, July 7, 1943.

50. Lubienski's Report, July 1943.

51. Interview of Mr Tadeusz Ullmann, New York, May 1967.

52. Air Ministry Communiqué, bulletin No. 10,796.

53. *The Times*, July 6, 1943; *Daily Telegraph*, July 6, 1943.

54. *New York Times*, July 6, 1943.

55. See Chapter VII, where this is commented on by *The Times* in September 1943.

56. *Gibraltar Chronicle*, July 6, 1943.

57. Testimony of Canning, and interview of Canning, June 1967. It has proven impossible despite every effort to specify Prchal's precise medical condition. This author, besides interviewing R.A.F. Gibraltar's then Chief Medical Officer Squadron Leader (now Doctor) Daniel Canning, of Glasgow, traced the Chief Surgeon of the Military Hospital at Gibraltar, Lieutenant-Colonel (now Doctor) H. T. Simmons, of Wilmslow, and the specialist who treated Prchal there, Major J. C. Goligher (now Professor of Surgery at Leeds Infirmary). Goligher compiled a detailed diagnosis and treatment report on Prchal, Form I-1237. Neither R.A.F. nor Army records contain this document or any other medical records relating to Prchal, and there is no reference to any disability suffered by him as a result of his

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crash in Air Historical Branch records. Nor did he draw any disability pension either then or later. The medical records have presumably been destroyed in a routine action. (Conversations with Canning, Simmons, Goligher and Prchal; correspondence with R.A.F. Record and Pay Office, Gloucester; Army Records Centre, Hayes; Royal Naval Hospital, Gibraltar; and Ministry of Defence, London. Interview of Dr Dudley Heath, the then Surgeon-Lieutenant Commander at R.N.A.S. Gibraltar.)

58. William Joyce, Views on the News, in English from Calais, 10.30 P.M., July 5, 1943. (B.B.C. Monitoring Report No. 1,149.)

59. *Ibid.*, 10.30 P.M., July 6, 1943. (B.B.C. Monitoring Report No. 1,450.)

60. Dr Otto Kriegk on German Home Service, 12.40 P.M., July 6, 1943.

61. Reported on N.P.D., German-language, 4.30 P.M., July 7, 1943. (B.B.C. Monitoring Report No. 1,451.)

62. Interview of Dr H. T. Simmons, July 1967.

63. Affidavit of Lubienski, December 1943.

64. Interview of Bailey, May 1967.

65. *New York Times*, July 6, 1943.

66. Interview of Lubienski, February 1967.

67. *New York Times*, July 6, 1943.

68. Interview of Canning, June 1967.

69. Interviews of Bolland, April and May 1967.

70. In general on Courts of Inquiry, see A.P.804: *Manual of Air Force Law* (1939 edition) and especially pp. 491 and 543. Also *King's Regulations and Air Council Instructions* (1943 edition), Chapter XVII, Section 1, "Courts of Inquiry" (paragraphs 1,310–1,385).

71. *K.R. & A.C.I.*, para. 1,326.

72. *Q.R. & A.C.I.* (1959), para. 1,265.

73. *Q.R. & A.C.I.* (1959), para. 1,269A.

74. *K.R. & A.C.I.*, para. 1,376, sub-para. 5.

75. *K.R. & A.C.I.*, para. 1,326, sub-para. 6A.

76. R.A.F. Form 412: "Proceedings of Court of Inquiry or Investigation opened on July 7, 1943 . . . to inquire into the Flying Accident on July 4, 1943 at North Front, Gibraltar." Cited above and

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below as Court of Inquiry. The R.A.F. Court of Inquiry was composed as follows: President: Group Captain J. G. Elton, D.F.C., A.F.C. of R.A.F. station, Turnberry. Members: Wing Commander A. W. Kay, of Headquarters, Coastal Command; and Squadron Leader D. M. Wellings, D.F.C., of Air Headquarters, Gibraltar. Observers: Wing Commander N. M. S. Russell, of Headquarters, Transport Command; and Major S. Dudzinski, of Inspectorate-General, Polish Air Force.

77. Interview with Bolland, May 1967.

78. *Q.R. & A.C.I.*, para. 1,266.

79. Court of Inquiry, part I.

80. Dudzinski's Report, September 1943.

81. Interview of Bailey, May 1967. No. 511 Squadron's O.R.B. says that there were twelve passengers on the aircraft, for example.

82. Cf. Marshall Pugh, *Commander Crabb* (Macmillan, 1956), p. 58: "Broken cigarette cartons were tinging the water green." It must be recalled that cigarettes, like liquor and clothes, were heavily rationed in Britain at that time.

83. Interview of Thorpe, August 1967. Interview of Ullmann, May 1967.

84. Interview of Lubienski, May 1967.

85. Interview of Perry, June 1967. In his July 1943 testimony, Posgate stated: "We recovered about thirty mailbags, diplomatic papers, money, etc."

86. Affidavit of Lubienski, December 1943.

87. This suggestion was made in *The Observer* on May 7, 1967 by Mr Donald Darling, who was in the M.I.9 unit at Gibraltar at the time. (Also: interview of Darling, June 1967; and interview of his superior, Lieutenant-Colonel J. A. Codrington, June 1967.)

88. According to Reuter on July 6, 1943, Mr W. H. Lock was a representative of the Ministry of War Transport in the Persian Gulf; he had been transferred to Canada, and was returning to England when the plane crashed at Gibraltar. His body was never recovered. The Foreign Office has told this author that there was no King's Messenger aboard the plane in which Sikorski died. "The diplomatic bags recovered after the crash apparently all belonged to General

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Sikorski's party." The Foreign Office Communications Department minuted at the time that it was "practically certain that no F.O. bags were involved." Equally, the Foreign Office can find no reference to "Lock" or "Pinder" in their files. (Affidavit of Lubienski, December 1943. Correspondence with Foreign Office, London, June and July 1967. The Foreign Office files concerning this crash are not available for inspection.)

89. Interviews of Stevens, June 1967.

90. Interview of Lubienski, February 1967; affidavit of Lubienski, December 1943.

91. Interview of Ullmann, May 1967.

92. Lubienski's Report, July 1943. Mason-Macfarlane's appointments book, July 8, 1943.

93. Salvage Report.

94. Interviews of Lubienski and Ullmann, May 1967. General details also from Mrs John B. Hall, from Perry, from Darling and from the widow of Air Commodore Simpson. Tadeusz Ullmann states that an account of this grim episode was written by Lieutenant Rosycki and published in Warsaw after the war. In his July 1943 report, Lubienski wrote: "All the other coffins were covered with lead, sealed and loaded into wooden crates; these steps were taken in view of the hot climate in Gibraltar, after we had had a very sad experience with General Sikorski's coffin."

95. Interview of Perry, June 1967.

96. *Manual of Air Force Law* (1939), p. 543. Testimony of Flight Lieutenant Edward Maks Prchal, July 8, 1943. Also, *Q.R. & A.C.I.*, paras. 1,269A and 1,265.

97. Interview of Squadron Leader T. H. A. Llewellyn, August 1967. Testimony of Squadron Leader J. F. Sach, July 19, 1943. He had been Prchal's Flight Commander since May 1943.

98. Affidavit of Lubienski, December 1943.

99. Testimony of Flight Lieutenant W. L. Watson, August 5, 1943.

100. From official papers the Court learned that the all-up weight was given as 54,600 pounds. From the records of No. 216 Group (Rear), the Transport Command formation at Heliopolis in the Middle East, the officially registered loading of the Liberator was

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found to have been disposed so that 1,543 pounds were in the nose, 1,793 pounds in the forward bomb bay, 827 pounds in the rear bomb bay, and 1,161 pounds in the tail. With 800 hours' experience piloting Liberators, Squadron Leader Sach, who had expressed such a high opinion of Prchal earlier, pointed out that "this load would tend to make the aircraft tail heavy, and if half-flap were used [as Prchal later said it was] would most probably cause the pilot to push his control column fairly well forward to prevent the nose from rising too high immediately after take-off." (Telegram from Rear 216 Group to Gibraltar, July 15, 1943. [Exhibit "E" to Court of Inquiry.] Letter from Ministry of Defence, June 1967. Testimony of Sach, July 1943. It can be noted that modern versions of Form 412 contain a space for the aircraft's loading particulars to be entered to the best of the Court's ability.)

101. A.P. 1867C: Pilot's Notes for Liberator B-24C and later marks. For Liberators to take off with all-up weights of over 58,000 pounds, special tyres and increased tyre-pressures were mandatory; but even this weight was higher than the maximum permitted for the B-24C. R.A.F. regulations stated: "All C-Mark aircraft are restricted to a maximum weight of 56,000 pounds." (*Ibid.*, para. 58(iii)(b), p. 46, footnote. Although this Air Publication gives the maximum safe all-up take-off weight as 56,000 pounds, one Liberator, AL610, was operated by Consairways, an airline run by Convair during the war, at a gross weight of 56,000 pounds in the United States continental limits, and at 58,000 pounds on trans-Pacific flights. Correspondence with General Dynamics, Convair Division.)

102. *Pilot Training Manual – B-24 – The Liberator*, published by U.S.A.F. Office of Flying Safety, p. 44.

103. Prchal's total day and night solo flying experience in Liberators was 362 hours 35 minutes, of which about four-fifths had been within the last six months. (Published interview of Captain E. M. Prchal, copyright F.C.I., published in *Dziennik Polski i Dziennik Zolnierza*, London, July 29, 1953.)

104. Squadron Leader J. F. Sach, who was Prchal's Flight Commander after May 1943, was asked by the Court whether he had heard of this incident. Sach replied, "No, I did not." He has repeated

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this denial more recently, and Prchal's other Flight Commander (from November 1942 to May 1943), Squadron Leader T. H. A. Llewellyn, has also stated to this author that he has no recollection of any such incident, and that he certainly would have if it had been brought to his attention. The Ministry of Defence has stated that there is no reference to such an incident in the records of either Lyneham R.A.F. station or No. 511 squadron for the whole period. It has not proved possible to trace Squadron Leader H. C. McPhail. (Testimony of Sach, July 1943. Interview of Sach, June 1967. Interview of Llewellyn, July 1967. Correspondence with Ministry of Defence.)

105. Table in para. 6 of Court of Inquiry report.

106. Interview of Mr E. M. Prchal, May 1967. See also interview of Prchal published in *Sunday Express*, May 14, 1967.

107. Letter from General Dynamics, Convair Division, May 1967. It should be noted that R.A.E. Farnborough found nothing to suggest that any such event had occurred.

108. The R.A.F. Station Commander, Bolland, recently stated: "The pilot was . . . taking off in darkness in an easterly direction, out into the blackness over the Mediterranean. . . . The pilot took off on his instruments. You should never take your eyes off them until you are about 2,000 feet up." (Published interview of Group Captain G. A. Bolland, *Sunday Times*, April 30, 1967.) Air Vice-Marshal Elton, who was President of the Court of Inquiry, is still of the belief that even on a moonless night the eastern horizon would be "very visible"; he recommended the author to see for himself. When the author had an opportunity to check the eastern horizon at night from a vantage point near Eastern Beach, Gibraltar, there was a full moon ahead and some mist. In these conditions the horizon could not be seen at all (August 1967). For Prchal's statement on whether he used his instruments or not, see Chapter VI.

109. Salvage Report.

110. Cf. Profile publication, No. 19: *The Consolidated B-24J Liberator* (Surrey, 1965)

111. Interview of Stevens, June 1967. Testimony of Stevens, July 1943.

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112. Interview of the Flying Control Officer, Flight Lieutenant R. B. Capes, published in *Dziennik Polski*, April 20, 1946. It has not proved possible to trace Capes, whose last known address was in Leicester.

113. No. 511 Squadron O.R.B., July 4, 1943.

114. Interview of Moore, June 1967.

115. Testimony of Bolland, July 1943. Interview of Bolland, May 1967.

116. Interview of Moore, June 1967; interview of Mr F. E. Hopgood, June 1967.

117. Testimony of Captain J. L. Williams, July 8, 1943.

118. Testimony of Moore, July 1943.

119. Testimony of L.A.C. H. D. Gibbs, and of Corporal A. K. Alexander, July 9, 1943.

120. Testimony of Captain Williams, recalled on July 9, 1943.

121. Interview of Mr W. A. L. Davis, June 1967. Testimony of Corporal Davis, July 1943.

122. Testimony of Hopgood, July 1943.

123. Salvage Report, July 9, 1943.

124. Lubienski's Report, July 1943.

125. Salvage Report, July 9, 1943.

5: Mr Churchill Kneels in Prayer

1. *The Times*, July 12, 1943. There is an article of unknown provenance, partially titled: "Requiem Mass for General Sikorski." Interview of Ullmann, May 1967. Apropos of the loss of *Orkan*, see Roskill, *The War at Sea* (HMSO, 1960), vol. III, part I, p. 41.

2. Broadcast from Calais in English, 10.30 P.M., July 10, 1943. From Zeesen in German, 11.30 A.M., July 10, 1943. (B.B.C. Monitoring Report No. 1,454.)

3. German Home Service, five P.M., July 10, 1943.

4. William Joyce, Views on the News, from Calais in English, 10.30 P.M., July 10, 1943 (see note 2).

5. Reuter, July 15, 1943. *Basler Nachrichten*, July 16, 1943. (See Chapter 1, note 2.)

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6. Article entitled "Mr Churchill at Mass," provenance uncertain, but apparently a London evening newspaper of July 15, 1943. Interview with Mme. Helena Sikorska, June 1966, and letter from Minister Karol Popiel, June 1967. Popiel, who was just behind Churchill, and several others at the service saw Mr Churchill openly crying. In the Governor's files in Gibraltar is a telegram (No. 396, dated three P.M., July 14, 1943) from the Secretary of State to Mason-Macfarlane suggesting that flags should be flown at half mast in Gibraltar.

7. Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide* (Collins, 1957), p. 684: The Alanbrooke Diaries, July 15, 1943.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 522: November 16, 1942.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 522: Notes on My Life.

10. Soundtrack of Polish Funeral Ceremony at Newark, July 16, 1943; re-broadcast by R.F.E. on April 23, 1962. It had originally been announced that Sikorski would be buried at Saint Mary's Cemetery, Kensal Green, London, but this decision was later amended.

6: Mailbags and Manifests

1. The Liberator's crew was: Flight Lieutenant E. M. Prchal, Captain and 1st pilot; Squadron Leader W. S. Herring, 2nd pilot; Warrant Officer L. Zalsberg, Navigator; Sergeant F. Kelly, Flight Engineer; Flight Sergeant C. B. Gerrie, Wireless Operator/Air Gunner; Flight Sergeant D. Hunter, Wireless Operator/Air Gunner. The bodies of Herring and Hunter were never found; all but Prchal were killed or presumed killed. (Court of Inquiry, part I, para. 2: Description of occupants of AL523.)

2. Testimony of L.A.C. Jabez Miles, July 1943.

3. Cf. testimony of Gibbs, July 1943.

4. Testimony of Briggs, July 1943.

5. Interview of Briggs, June 1967.

6. Court of Inquiry, part I, para. 10: Conclusions.

7. Testimonies of Flight Lieutenant R. S. Coleman, Flight Lieutenant Perry, Wing Commander Claude Dunkerley, July 1943. From this evidence it would appear that both the mysterious Britons were on board at take-off. Flight Lieutenant Reginald Coleman, an em-

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barkation officer at No. 27 A.D.R.U. (Gibraltar) testified: "On the evening of July 4, I was on duty at North Front with Pilot Officer Briggs. At about 22.00 hours two passengers, Mr Pinder and Mr Lock, who were to travel on Liberator AL523, reported at the office. Of the eleven passengers due to emplane on Liberator AL523 that evening these were the only two passengers whom I checked onto the aircraft." The body of Mr Pinder was found, but that of Mr Lock was not.

8. Testimony of Bolland, July 1943; interview of Bolland, May 1967.

9. Testimony of Air Commodore S. P. Simpson, July 10, 1943.

10. Testimony of Gunner William Miller, July 10, 1943.

11. *K.R. & A.C.I.*, para. 704: Loose Articles to be Stowed and Secured. "The pilot on an aeroplane will be responsible that all loose articles carried in the aeroplane are properly stowed and secured before the aeroplane leaves the ground." This was the paragraph under which the Court made its recommendation on this incident.

12. Testimony of Flight Lieutenant E. M. Prchal, recalled, after July 19, 1943.

13. Testimony of Capes, July 1943.

14. Testimony of Air Commodore S. P. Simpson, July 10, 1943.

15. Testimony of A.C.1 Qualtrough, July 1943.

16. Testimony of Posgate, July 1943.

17. Interview of Squadron Leader T. H. A. Llewellyn, August 1967.

18. Interview of Prchal published in *Dziennik Polski*, July 29, 1953.

19. *Sunday Times*, April 30, 1967. *Sunday Express*, April 30, 1967. Interview of Dr Daniel Canning, June 1967. No pilot would deliberately begin a shallow dive in darkness when at an altitude of only 30 feet but, "if the aircraft was flying level when the controls jammed, the jamming itself might move the elevator controls slightly, thus causing the aircraft to descend." Letter from Falk, August 1967.

20. Interview of Perry, June 1967. Mason-Macfarlane's appointments book, July 12, 1943. Lubienski's Report, July 1943.

21. Obituary in *The Courier*, Cranbrook, Kent, July 1943.

22. German Home Service, two P.M., and five P.M., July 6, 1943. (B.B.C. Monitoring Report No. 1,450.)

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23. Cf. *Evening Standard*, May 9, 1943: "I wonder what service to Mr Churchill or our Allies Major Cazalet thinks he is doing by circulating these curious opinions to his handful of three hundred friends."

24. Interview of Briggs, June 1967.

25. Testimony of L.A.C. Walter Titterington, July 13, 1943. Mr Titterington has since died.

26. Testimony of Private F. C. Callow, July 13, 1943. Testimony of Corporal Thomas Tomlinson, July 13, 1943.

27. Testimony of Hopgood, July 13, 1943. The other aircraft was Liberator AM914, according to Sergeant N. J. Moore's private records.

28. Remarks of Air Marshal Sir J. C. Slessor, A.O.C.-in-C., Coastal Command, August 11, 1943.

29. Interview of Ullmann, May 1967.

30. Testimony of Prchal, July 1943. From the regulations for the holding of Courts of Inquiry, it seems likely that the words "check the controls" were those first mentioned by Prchal. The regulations prescribe: "The evidence of witnesses is to be recorded in the first person in narrative form, recording as nearly as possible the actual words used, and not in the form of questions and answers unless the Court think fit to record any particular questions and answers verbatim." The disputed remark was in an Answer given to a Question. (*Q.R. & A.C.I.* [1959], para. 1,266.)

31. The word "indiscriminately" was applied by Quayle (interview of May 1967).

32. Testimony of Wing Commander Stevens, July 1943. Strictly speaking, the information given on the elevator control and locking mechanism and the diagrams reproduced on page 109 and facing page 145 [print edition only], relate to the B-24D, while the British Liberator II was equivalent to the American B-24C. The British variant was also known on its factory contract as LB-30. However, the approximation would seem permissible, for the manufacturers have confirmed to the author: "The elevator control system used on the LB-30 was operationally identical to that of the B-24D. As far as our people can determine and remember, the gust [controls] lock systems were also identical. (Correspondence with General Dynamics,

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Convair Division, San Diego.)

33. Mason-Macfarlane's Record, July 18, 1945.

34. Sinclair's Answer given in the House of Commons, July 14, 1943. *The Times*, July 15, 1943.

35. Salvage Report, July 13, 1943.

36. *Ibid.*, July 14, 1943.

37. *Ibid.*, July 15, 1943.

38. Interview of Stevens, June 1967.

39. Testimony of Stevens, July 1943.

40. Interview of Bailey, May 1967. Mason-Macfarlane's appointments book, July 17, 1943.

41. Interview of Quayle, May 1967.

42. This suggested that the second pilot, Squadron Leader Herring, was co-operating in the ditching procedure. As to the possibility that the switches might both have been knocked off during the crash, Wing Commander Stevens is inclined now to discount this, since there was usually a safety bar which had to be raised before the switches could be actuated. (Interview of Stevens, June 1967.)

43. Testimony of Stevens, July 1943.

44. Court of Inquiry, part I, para. 10: Conclusions.

45. Dudzinski's Report, September 1943.

46. Testimony of Flight Lieutenant John Buck, August 5, 1943.

47. After the conclusion of the Inquiry a further theory on how the controls may have become jammed circulated among some R.A.F. experts. This theory is discussed in Chapter IX.

48. "Reopening of the Court of Inquiry on August 3, 1943 at Headquarters, Coastal Command, by order of Air Marshal Sir J. C. Slessor, K.C.B., D.S.O., M.C., to enquire further into the flying accident on July 4, 1943 at North Front, Gibraltar, involving Liberator AL523."

49. *Flight Manual B-24D Airplane*, issued by Consolidated Aircraft Corporation, San Diego, California: section, "Flying the B-24D." The British regulations were equally specific: "Preliminaries: unlock controls, *stow strap* and ensure that the locking lever is fully depressed" (A.P. 1867).

50. To the Duty Flying Control Officer, Flight Lieutenant R. B.

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Capes. The possibility that anybody could confuse the simple locking-lever, which was a pointed metal lever, with the undercarriage retracting lever, as Prchal had suggested, was remote: the latter lever is located on the left side of the pilot's pedestal, and before it can be operated a push switch on the lever has to be depressed to open a solenoid-operated safety device, designed to prevent the lever being operated unintentionally. There is no similarity between the two levers in appearance, position or operation. (*Flight Manual B-24, The Liberator*, p. 44.)

51. *Pilot Training Manual B-24, The Liberator*, p. 44.

52. Cf. *Flight Manual B-24D Airplane*, p. 13: "After take-off maintain airspeed under 150 m.p.h. until flaps are raised." The paragraph on "Flying Limitations" in the relevant Air Ministry Manual on the Liberator II states: Maximum indicated airspeed for lowering flaps fully: 155 m.p.h. Maximum indicated airspeed for lowering flaps 10°: 180 m.p.h. Maximum indicated airspeed for lowering undercarriage: 155 m.p.h. (A.P. 1867: Pilot's Notes on Liberator II.)

53. Testimony of Flight Lieutenant W. L. Watson, August 1943. Author's italics.

54. *K.R. & A.C.I.* (1943), para. 706: "The Loading of Aircraft." "The load which an aircraft is to carry is to be stipulated by the officer authorising the flight. . . . The Captain of the aircraft will be responsible that: the aircraft is loaded in accordance with the instructions given to him by the officer authorising the flight . . . [and that] the condition of loading is within the limits (i) laid down by the weight sheet summary in vol. III or in the loading and centre-of-gravity diagram in vol. I of the relevant publication; or (ii) specially authorised under Clause 5." Clause 5 states: "The Commanding Officer of a flying unit will ensure that the . . . 'maximum permissible weight for take-off and straight flying' is not exceeded." See Chapter IV, section 5.

55. 2,000 gallons of petrol were put into the tanks before departure whereas the consumption from Cairo is likely to have been between 1,500 and 1,800 gallons. An additional 200 gallons or so could have meant a further 1,500 pounds in weight. Furthermore the aircraft's departure had been delayed for an hour while the iron bed

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which Madame Lesniowska had requested for the use of her father was installed in the centre section. That the Court did not investigate these matters in its proceedings in order to establish the weight of the plane on leaving Gibraltar is quite inexplicable.

56. Mason-Macfarlane's Record, July 18, 1945.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 4: Mason-Macfarlane's personal (and official) papers are held by his daughter, Mrs John B. Hall, at Galashiels. The most important of these have been put on microfilm by the author. The records of the Governor's office are still at Gibraltar. Obviously his diaries, which are known to have been voluminous, would have been of considerable interest; they are known to have survived until 1952, one year before his death, at least, but nothing has been seen of them since then, and they would seem to have been destroyed by his late son. Every search of family papers has failed to bring them to light, nor are they in the records of the Ministry of Defence, or the Royal Artillery, or of the Royal United Services Institution.

58. *Dziennik Polski*, July 29, 1953.

59. The testimony on oath of the airman who picked up Prchal, A.C.1 Derek Qualtrough (who now lives in the Isle of Man), was: "We arrived at the scene of the crash in about five minutes and were hailed by someone in the water whom we at once pulled on board. He was wearing an inflated Mae West and was quite conscious although unable to speak." Prchal was transferred soon after to an Air/Sea Rescue launch, whose O.C., Flight Lieutenant Posgate, testified on oath: "The pilot was wearing a Mae West but no parachute harness." See Chapter VIII, section 2 and note 18.

60. Testimony of Buck, August 1943.

61. Testimony of Squadron Leader R. J. Falk, August 1943.

62. Testimony of Prchal recalled, August 5, 1943.

63. Testimony of Flight Lieutenant Watson, August 1943.

64. Court of Inquiry, part II. At the time, there were only two permissible findings on culpability, either "to blame" or "not to blame." There is growing opinion in the R.A.F. today that it would be statistically more useful if a third verdict, "not proven," were admitted. Air Vice-Marshal Elton, who was the Court's President, is now managing director of a radio engineering firm in London. In

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accordance with Ministry of Defence etiquette, he was not permitted to discuss the various points raised in this book's description of the Court of Inquiry. He has however read the chapters concerned, and writes that he "can easily see that many people will not agree with the Court's findings" after reading them. The officer who was the Air Ministry's Chief Inspector of Accidents at the time, Air Commodore Sir Vernon Brown, recorded in the *Daily Telegraph* of May 2, 1967 that "the cause of the accident was determined without any doubt whatever" but he does not feel able to elaborate on this now: "Not wild horses can drag from me any statement as to the cause of the accident." (Correspondence with Elton and Brown.)

7: The Unmentioned Issue

1. Recommendations of Air Marshal Sir J. C. Slessor, A.O.C.-in-C., Coastal Command, August 11, 1943.

2. Interview of Prchal, May 1967.

3. Foreign Office to Count Edward Raczynski, C.9840/5680/G, September 1, 1943. Appendices, the communiqué draft and the report of the Court of Inquiry and associated exhibits.

4. Text of draft Air Ministry Press Communiqué (undated).

5. Adam Romer to General Marian Kukiel, Minister of National Defence, September 3, 1943 (in Polish).

6. Handwritten notation in Polish on copy of Report's p. 4, para. 10, referred to in above letter.

7. According to Victor Zora – whose article in *The Guardian* on May 5, 1967 was widely praised in Polish circles in London – some elements on the extreme right of the Polish émigré community soon began to blame Britain for Sikorski's death.

8. Dudzinski's Report, September 6, 1943.

9. Ministry of Interior (Ullmann) to Romer, September 7, 1943 (in Polish).

10. Romer to Prof W. Karminski, Minister of Justice and Attorney General, September 9, 1943; also Romer to Kukiel, September 9, 1943 (both in Polish).

11. Note by Colonel Stanislaw Karpinski of Polish Air Force In-

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spectorate-General, establishing Commission of Inquiry, September 8, 1943 (in Polish). The commission consisted of Colonel P. Dudzinski, Colonel Pistl, Colonel (Eng.) Lewandowski, Colonel Bajan, and Major (Eng.) S. Dudzinski. Colonel P. Dudzinski now lives in London. It was not possible to trace the unrelated Major S. Dudzinski. Colonel Bajan died during 1967.

12. Proceedings of Inquiry by Polish Air Force Inspectorate-General's Commission, London, September 14, 1943 (in Polish). In his report, S. Dudzinski wrote: "The local divers worked rather clumsily and after they had brought the plane up onto the surface of the sea, they let it go to the bottom again and the fuselage in consequence broke away from the wings and the pieces were carried away by the sea currents and tides." Lubienski and Ullmann made similar statements to this author (May 1967).

13. "Projekt: Draft Air Ministry Press Communiqué" (in English, enclosure to above report).

14. Cf. Jozef M. Zaranski, *Zagadka katastrofy Gibraltarskiej po 15 latach* (London, 1959). There was minor editing of the text. As published in *The Times* (September 21, 1943) it read: "The report of the Court of Inquiry has now been received. It is apparent that the accident was due to the jamming of the elevator controls shortly after take-off, with the result that the plane became uncontrollable. After most careful consideration of all the available evidence, including that of the pilot, it has not been possible to determine how the jamming occurred but it has been established that there was no sabotage. It is also clear that the captain of the aircraft who is a pilot of great experience and exceptional abilities was in no way to blame. An officer of the Polish Air Force attended throughout the proceedings." The communiqué was repeated as a written Answer to a Question in the House of Commons, asked by Mr I. Thomas, on d September 23, 1943. (*Official Report*, Hansard, vol. 392, col. 458.) It was reaffirmed in answer to a Question asked by Mr Tufton Beamish in the House of Commons in 1948.

15. Minister of Justice to Polish Air Force Inspectorate-General, November 19, 1943: "This question is secret and is asked only in order to complete our Polish files, not those of the British Inquiry,

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which is definitely closed" (in Polish).

16. Minister of Justice to Attorney Dr T. Cyprian, September 16, 1943; almost identical letters were sent to Dr Adam Nowotny and Mr Jerzy Jaczynowski asking them to undertake the inquiry with Cyprian (all in Polish). Report by Cyprian, Nowotny and Jaczynowski, to Minister of Justice, October 5, 1943 (in Polish).

17. Minister of Justice, Prof W. Karminski, to Prime Minister, Mr S. Mikolajczyk, October 18, 1943 (in Polish).

18. *Katyn Forest Massacre*, Congressional Hearings, p. 2080. Obviously the papers of Mr Sumner Welles would be of absorbing interest in connection with his sincere belief that Sikorski was assassinated. These papers consist of 175,000 individual items in 42 cabinet drawers in his son's Washington home; they have however not yet been processed and indexed, and no researchers have been afforded access to them. Their indexer, Miss Therese Nadeau of the Ford Foundation, who is familiar with the papers, has stated to this author: "I am confident I would recall it if I had come across any correspondence which referred to these incidents." Equally, no reference to the November 1942 incident at Montreal is to be found amongst President Roosevelt's papers or among official U.S. State Department files. All this goes to confirm that Sikorski deliberately played down the importance of the forced landing at Montreal, as he subsequently said. (Correspondence with Mr Benjamin Welles, Miss Therese Nadeau, the Director of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, and conversations with Dr Arthur Kogan of U.S. State Department Historical Office, Washington.)

19. Article by Colonel Leon Mitkiewicz in *Kultura* (Paris), No. 6/128, 1958, pp. 123–4: "*Z wypadkow lotnoczych gen. Sikorskiego*." Also correspondence with Mitkiewicz, and interview of May 1967 in New York.

20. Testimony of Rev. Kaczynski, June 1, 1942; testimony of Dr Jozef H. Retinger, June 1, 1942. All these testimonies, which were taken by various officers and authorities, are held in either Polish or English versions in a General Sikorski Historical Institute file entitled: *Sprawa bomby w samolocie podzas przelotu gen. Sikorskiego do Ameryki w marcu 1942r.* (No. A.20.6/2.)

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21. Statement by Wing Commander K—— to G-2, March 1942 (published in English as appendix to article, note 19; also in G.S.H.I. file, note 20).

22. Testimony of Wing Commander K——, July 20, 1942.

23. Protasewicz subsequently made a statement claiming to have been shown the bomb on the plane. (Testimony of Protasewicz, July 1,1942.)

24. That Sikorski went on by train to Washington is confirmed by his Diary, March 23, 1942.

25. Report of G-2 experts, quoted as appendix to article (note 19).

26. Testimony of Squadron Leader Geoffrey McDougall, R.C.A.F., April 7, 1942.

27. Quoted in Lady F. C. Anstruther's book, *General Sikorski* (London, 1943).

28. Statement in letter form by War Office Technical Expert, May 28, 1942.

29. Statement by Royal Canadian Mounted Police, May 14, 1942: interview of Wing Commander K—— at the Sulgrave Hotel, New York City, May 12, 1942.

30. Testimony of Retinger, June 1, 1942.

31. Statement by Wing Commander K—— to Mr Donald E. W. Fish, Ayr, June 27, 1942.

32. Article by Colonel Kazimierz Iranek Osmecki, *Dziennik Polski*, July 1, 1958: *Bomba w samolocie o ktorej szeptano w 1942r. byla swieca zapalajaca*.

33. Testimony of Second Lieutenant Eugeniusz Jurewicz, July 18, 1942. There is also a statement by him in Polish, written in London on July 27, 1942. He was not disciplined in any way for his part in the affair.

34. Testimony of Wing Commander K——,July 20, 1942.

35. Most Secret: Duff Cooper to General Sikorski, July 21, 1942.

36. Most Secret: General Sikorski to Duff Cooper, July 23, 1942.

37. Information from Protasewicz, July 1967.

38. Count Ciechanowski writes in his memoirs (*Defeat in Victory*) that the aircraft was a special plane placed at Sikorski's dis-

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posal by Mr Churchill.

39. Report of the Commander-in-Chief's Adjutant [Glowczynski] on the Accident at Montreal, dated Washington, December 1, 1942 (in Polish).

40. Count Jan Ciechanowski, *Defeat in Victory* (Doubleday & Co., 1947). Ciechanowski, who lives in Washington, refused to be interviewed on the subject of this little-known incident.

41. Telegram from Colonel Marecki to General Klimecki, November 30, 1942 (in Polish).

42. Related by Count Stefan Zamoyski, who was in the party waiting to greet Sikorski (interview of June 1967).

43. Ciechanowski, *op. cit.*

44. Entry in the White House appointments book, December 2,1942.

45. Ciechanowski, *op. cit.* In G.S.H.I. files there is a lengthy account of this conversation, written by Sikorski himself: Welles had told Roosevelt, "the security police state that it was a definite act of sabotage."

46. The only other published reference to this crash seems to be in the late Ambassador Jozef Lipski's book, *Trzy Podroze gen. Sikorskiego do Ameryki* (published by General Sikorski Historical Institute, 1949), where he writes: "After arriving at Washington one day late because of an aircraft accident taking off at Montreal, General Sikorski was guest of President Roosevelt." The author's search of all the Montreal newspapers, in particular of *Montreal Standard* and *Montreal Gazette*, showed no reference to the incident.

47. Confidential Report on Results of an Investigation of an Air Accident involving General Sikorski, at Montreal, forwarded by Sir Louis Greig to General Sikorski on January 7, 1943 (translated into Polish). There is little reference to, and some dispute over, the incident in official records. In R.A.F. Ferry Command's Operations Records Book there is a brief reference to the failure of Hudson BW409 to take off, and a note that the passengers were ferried to Washington next day. Nothing else in any way connected with the incident could be found in Air Historical Branch records in London. There is an old R.C.A.F. headquarters file entitled "R.A.F. Ferry

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Command Crashes," in the Public Archives of Canada, but examination of this showed it to be incomplete, with nothing related to the Montreal incident. As Dorval was also a civilian airport, the Canadian Department of Transport was consulted, but they had no records of the incident either. Squadron Leader R. E. Marrow, said by the Poles to have been the "R.A.F." pilot of the plane, was not an R.A.F. officer according to the 1943 *Air Force List*, and BW409 was almost certainly an R.A.F. aircraft although BW408 and BW410 were both Canadian held, as part of the "lend-lease" arrangements, used in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. Even so, the Ministry of Defence, in London, believes the aircraft to have been Canadian-held, as there is no record of it whatsoever in R.A.F. files. Finally, Sir William Stephenson, who was the head of the British Intelligence services in America at the time, has informed this author that he personally has "no, repeat no, recollection of any such incident." (Correspondence With Ministry of Defence, London; Department of National Defence, Ottawa; and Sir William Stephenson.)

48. Diary of General Sikorski, January 12 and 13, 1943.

49. There are no records of Greig's conversations with Sikorski, so far as this author is aware. Sir Louis Greig was personal secretary to the Secretary of State for Air, Sir Archibald Sinclair (see note 47). The author's supposition is based on two entries in General Sikorski's diary. The first was on April 4, 1943: "3.30 P.M.: General Sikorski went with his wife, daughter and Lieutenant Glowczynski to Sir Louis Greig's at Richmond. 4.15 P.M.: tea party for about fifteen people. General Sikorski had a conference with Sir Louis Greig and Colonel Colt of the American mission." On April 6, 1943, Sikorski saw Greig for about half an hour after eleven A.M.

50. Sikorski to Mikolajczyk, endorsed: "filed May 7, 1943" (in Polish).

51. Letter from Mr W. L. Bonaparte-Wyse, "Sabotage Threat to de Gaulle," *Daily Telegraph*, May 11, 1967.

52. Churchill, vol. IV, pp. 611 and 716. Bryant, *op. cit.*, p. 548. The Earl of Avon, *The Eden Memoirs, The Reckoning* (Cassell, 1965), pp. 386–7.

53. Letter from Ministry of Defence, London, June 1967.

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54. Interview with Bonaparte-Wyse, May 1967.

55. Interview with Mr Peter Loat, Cornwall, June 1967; correspondence with Loat, June 1967.

56. Letter from Ministry of Defence, June 1967. Letter in *Daily Telegraph*, May 11, 1967. Bonaparte-Wyse, it will be noted, was informed by de Gaulle's A.D.C. that the Wellington's pilot had told him that the plane had been sabotaged. Although both the Britons recall this, and the A.D.C. recalls being asked to leave the aircraft, he states however: "I do not remember that the cause of this incident was attributed to sabotage." General de Gaulle, who was also asked about the incident at this author's request, also "had no memories of it." (Correspondence with M. François Charles-Roux, and with the French Ambassador in London.)

8: Postmortem

1. Interview of Bailey, May 1967.

2. Protocol of Polish Air Force Inspectorate-General's Commission of Inquiry, November 27, 1943 (in Polish).

3. Mason-Macfarlane's Record, July 18, 1945.

4. Interview, together with Herr Rolf Hochhuth, of Mme. Helena Sikorska and Mme. Lisiewicz, who had interpreted between Mme. Sikorska and Mason-Macfarlane at the December 1943 meeting, June 1966. This was confirmed in an interview of Mme. Lisiewicz in April 1967, and to Hochhuth in an interview with Colonel S. Lesniowski, June 1966.

5. Peis, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

6. Stanislaw Mikolajczyk, *The Pattern of Soviet Domination* (Sampson Low, Marston & Co., Ltd., 1948). Cf. Peis, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

7. Woodward, *op. cit.*, p. 429.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 298–300.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 302.

10. General Kukiel had temporarily replaced Sikorski.

11. Woodward, *op. cit.*, p. 310. In his book *The Pattern of Soviet Domination*, p. 109, Mikolajczyk described this episode as follows: "Churchill shook his finger at me. 'Unless you accept the frontier

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you're out of business for ever!' he cried. 'The Russians will sweep through your country and your people will be liquidated. You're on the verge of annihilation. We'll become sick and tired of you if you continue arguing.' "

12. Robert E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins* (Harper & Bros., 1948), p. 842.

13. *Dziennik Polski*, July 29, 1953. Prchal's statement that he decided to fly to England after Adam Doboszinski was sentenced to death ("Obviously under pressure, he [Doboszinski] admitted to being responsible for the sabotage of the plane in which General Sikorski died") is a minor mystery: the verbatim proceedings of the trial were published in Warsaw in 1949 under the title *Proces Adam Doboszinski*, but apart from a passing reference by the Prosecutor to Doboszinski's pro-German activities and the sixth anniversary of Sikorski's death, the Gibraltar crash is not mentioned in the 587–page volume. The airliner crash in 1948, in which Prchal's "death" was reported, was presumably the crash of a Czech airliner 100 miles south-west of Athens reported in *The Times* of December 24, 1948. An inquiry to the Czechoslovakian airlines C.S.A. has so far produced no reply.

14. R.F.E. broadcast, April 23, 1962.

15. *Sunday Telegraph*, April 30, 1967. *Sunday Express*, April 30, 1967.

16. *Dziennik Polski*, July 29, 1953. Prchal has not disputed the report of his interview, although it is known to have been read by him.

17. Interview of Prchal, May 1967.

18. This is the opinion given to the author by Dr Stephen Black, MRCS, LRCP, who is Director of the Nuffield Research Unit in Psycho-Physiology (July 1967).

19. Court of Inquiry, para. 10: Conclusions.

20. Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin*.

21. Stefan Korbonski, *Warsaw in Chains* (Allen & Unwin 1959); and cf. D. Thomson, *Europe Since Napoleon* (Longman's 1957), p. 789.

22. Winston S. Churchill, *My Early Years* (Fontana, 1959), p. 284;

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this book was first published in 1930.

23. Diary of General Erwin Lahousen, July 16, 1943. The Governor's A.D.C. confirms that there was at this time a spectacular sabotage attack on a fuel dump there.

24. *Ibid.*, February 2, 1943.

25. Charles Wighton and Günter Peis, *They Spied on England* (based on the German Secret Service War Diary of General Lahousen; Odhams, 1958), p. 35. "Verbally," for the book was based on the diary, and on interviews; and Sikorski is certainly not mentioned once in the diary. Interrogated by Colonel John H. Amen, U.S. Army, on November 7, 1945, General Lahousen stated: "The middle of the year 1943, or June 1943 – that is the end of the period about which I can report, because then I left office and went to the Front, and thus do not know what went on." (National Archives, file of pre-trial interrogations: interrogation summary of General Erwin Lahousen, November 7, 1945.)

26. Lahousen Diary, March 11, 1942.

27. German Foreign Office archives: Schmidt protocols of Führer conferences.

28. Interview with Marian Turski, August 1967. Letter from Popiel, June 1967.

29. German propaganda leaflet, camouflaged as of Polish origin, entitled: *Jak zginal general Sikorski?* The author's copy was obtained from the Pilsudski Institute in New York. It was circulated at one time in Switzerland, among Poles, by the German Legation at Berne, which proves its true origin. (Letter in G.S.H.I. files from Polish Legation in Berne, February 15, 1944.)

30. Second German propaganda leaflet in Polish: *Prawda o Sikorskim!* (c. July 1943).

31. It was the German-controlled Radio Paris which commented, on the evening after the crash, that British agents had a marked preference for crimes committed by "technical means": the sinking of the liner carrying Lord Kitchener to Russia, the motorcycle accident in which Lawrence of Arabia was killed, and the accident which cost the life of King Feisal's son were cited as examples: "The technique varies, but the motive remains the same." (Kitchener died when his

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ship hit a mine.) The Germans were haunted by the possibility of British assassination attempts. At one stage Himmler wrote to Hierl a letter about the special precautions he was taking to protect Hitler from aircraft "accidents," as there was the possibility that the air crashes in which variously Munitions Minister Todt, General Hube and the irreplaceable General Dietl were killed had not been accidents; ten days after this letter was written, the (British-made) assassin's bomb exploded in Hitler's Rastenburg HQ. (B.B.C. Monitoring Report No. 1,449, July 6, 1943: Radio Paris broadcast, ten P.M., July 5, 1943. The Himmler comments are from a letter, Himmler to Hierl, in folder No. 33, N.A.R.S. Microfilm T-175, Roll 69. The letter is dated July 10, 1944.)

32. Maisky to Hochhuth, December 1966.

33. Interviewer on Radio Free Europe to Count Ludwik Lubienski, July 4, 1954: "Was there any moment when the Soviet plane in which Ambassador Maisky flew to Gibraltar . . . was parked near General Sikorski's plane?" The answer as we know from the Court of Inquiry was that both planes were parked next to each other. As early as July 7, 1943, the German Foreign Office broadcast a statement commenting that certain British papers were "making careful attempts to throw the responsibility for Sikorski's death on the Bolsheviks." This was reported back to the British Government by the B.B.C. (R.F.E. broadcast, July 4, 1954 [in Polish]. B.B.C. Monitoring Report No. 1,451, dated July 8, 1943.)

9: Open Verdict

1. For expert medical evidence on this point see Chapter VIII, section 2 and note 18.

2. The Governor, General Mason-Macfarlane, is very specific on the subject of the Mae West inconsistency in his Record of July 18, 1945. He had known, and flown with, Prchal on previous occasions and greatly admired his skill, yet in his Record he wrote: "There was one very extraordinary fact. The pilot, like nearly all pilots, had his idiosyncrasies and he never, under any circumstances, wore his Mae West, either taking off or landing. He had his Mae West hung over

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the back of his seat where it would be handy if required. He stoutly maintained in evidence that he had not departed from his usual practice, and that when he started his take-off run he was not wearing his Mae West."

The publishers appealed to Mr Prchal for information on this point in a letter on June 22, 1967:

> On examining [Mr Irving's] draft manuscript we see there is one matter which we find very puzzling and we cannot help wondering whether you might be kind enough to elucidate it for us. One of the questions put to you at the later session of the Court of Inquiry in England was whether you were wearing a Mae West on this occasion, and you replied, "No. I had my Mae West behind my back where I normally carry it." This answer is inconsistent with the evidence. [Then summarised.] The point is of further significance because although it was not taken up at the Inquiry special emphasis is laid on this discrepancy in the private papers of the late General Mason-Macfarlane, then Governor of Gibraltar, who makes the comment that it was not your practice to wear a Mae West and that not only were you wearing it but that "every tape and fastening was properly put on and done up."
>
> No doubt, it would appear, you owe your life to the fact that you had on this occasion put on your Mae West before take-off and we wonder whether you may be able to give some explanation as to what led you to do so.
>
> I would like to make it clear that Mr Irving's book demolishes the allegations that have circulated to the effect that you deliberately staged the accident.

Since no reply was received to this, a cable was sent on July 12 in which the publishers offered to keep open for a few days their invitation to include his version of the discrepancy. No reply was received.

3. Mason-Macfarlane's Record, July 18, 1945.
4. *Ibid.*.
5. *Völkischer Beobachter*, July 16, 1943.
6. Published interview of Group Captain G. A. Bolland in *Sun-*

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day Times, April 10, 1967. Interview with Group Captain Bolland, May 1967.

7. Interview with Mr J. F. Sach, August 1967.

8. Testimony of Prchal, July 8, 1943. Testimony of Stevens, July 1943: "Both main engine ignition switches were found off."

9. Affidavit of Lubienski, December 1943. Interview with Mr N. J. Moore, July 1967.

10. Published interview with Mr A. D. Firth in *The Times*, May 4, 1967.

11. Mason-Macfarlane's Record, July 18, 1945.

12. Stanislaw Mikolajczyk, *The Pattern of Soviet Domination* (Sampson Low, Marston & Co., Ltd., 1948).

13. Mr A. D. Firth in *The Times*, May 4, 1967. Interview with Firth, May 1967.

14. Interview with Prchal, May 16, 1967.

15. Interview with Bolland, May 17, 1967.

16. Private source; this witness has been questioned independently by both the author and the publisher of this book.

17. Interview with Wing Commander Roland Falk, August 1967. Interview with Mr J. F. Sach, July 1967. Interview with Mr T. H. A. Llewellyn, August 1967.

18. Letter from Falk, August 7, 1967.

19. Interview with Sach, August 1967.

20. There is evidence that this aircraft was carrying a greater load than the pilot suspected. We know from the diving operations that cases of Leica cameras were recovered and it is possible that these were not included in the official cargo. Likewise, according to Mr A. J. Perry, the Governor's A.D.C., interviewed in July 1967, there were large purchases of drink in Gibraltar by occupants of the plane – he thought an average of at least one case of spirit or sherry per person – which, especially as this was a V.I.P. plane, may have been taken aboard the aircraft at the last moment without being registered on the official manifest. In addition there was the iron bed installed for General Sikorski. But none of these items was known to Prchal, who believed the only additional load from Cairo to be one extra passenger and his luggage.

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The plane was heavily loaded with official cargo before its disastrous journey from the Middle East began; we have already noted that for at least one leg of this journey the Liberator was considered tail-heavy (Chapter VI, section 2), and this may have aggravated any general heavy loading. (Normally a Customs clearance form C.902 on cargo would have been filed at the appropriate port of entry by H.M. Customs, and then destroyed after a certain period of time. The forms relating to cargo carried on AL523's last flight have been searched for by this author but he was informed by the Departmental Records Officer of H.M. Customs and Excise that since the aircraft failed to arrive it is most unlikely that the forms were in fact deposited with Customs in this country.)

There is certainly strong first- and second-order evidence that the Liberator was very heavily loaded at the moment of its crash. An examination of No. 511 Squadron official records for both June and July 1943 in conjunction with private records kept by Sergeant N. J. Moore of the local maintenance unit N.C.O. at Gibraltar shows that in terms of fuel and cargo this was one of the heaviest Liberator flights of that period. The available records show six other identical Liberators bound from the Middle East, and flying on from Gibraltar to Lyneham, between June 25 and July 6, 1943 – a fair sample from which to draw conclusions. Their average payload (freight, mail and passengers) was 3,300 pounds. Yet the official payload carried by Sikorski's Liberator was at least 5,500 pounds.

The seven aircraft listed below are all those in the available records which fulfil the necessary conditions – i.e., Liberator II's flying from Gibraltar to Lyneham, en route from the Middle East, at this time.

Aircraft number	*Date*	*Fuel added*	*Cargo*	*Passengers*	*Approx. payload*
AL551	June 25	800	1,154 lbs.	8	2,750 lbs.
AL584	June 29	1,900	823 lbs.	8	1,420 lbs.
AM922	June 29	1,900	1,722 lbs.	9	3,520 lbs.
AL616	July 1	1,900	1,957 lbs.	12	4,350 lbs.
AL523	July 4	2,000	3,336 lbs.	11	5,520 lbs.
AL584	July 5	2,000	580 lbs.	14	3,380 lbs.
AM914	July 6	2,000	2,334 lbs.	10	4,330 lbs.

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It can be noted that the aircraft which followed Sikorski's aircraft back to England, on July 5, carried very little cargo. To calculate each "approximate payload," each passenger and his gear have been assumed to weigh just under 200 pounds (on General Sikorski's aircraft the ten passengers boarding at Cairo weighed 1,980 pounds). The Sergeant in charge of Gibraltar's maintenance unit has stated that AL523's fuel tanks were filled to maximum. The capacity of the Liberator's port and starboard main tanks was a total of 2,500 gallons. (A.P. 1867, Provisional Pilot's Notes, Parts I, II, III and IV.) On the flight out from Lyneham to Gibraltar, these same aircraft carried an average of 7,000 pounds payload, but their fuel load was considerably less.

Complete fuelling records have unfortunately not been preserved, but from Sergeant Moore's private records again, we know how much fuel was officially put into each of the seven Liberators, and again we find that this Liberator had a heavy load – 2,000 gallons (15,500 pounds) – of aviation spirit pumped aboard. As the consumption of petrol from Cairo to Gibraltar would almost certainly have been between 1,500 and 1,800 gallons, it would seem that at take-off from Gibraltar it had at least 200 extra gallons which would have weighed about 1,550 pounds.

As if this was not enough, on the figures revealed in the Court of Inquiry alone we see that there was a net increase of 300 pounds in the aircraft's take-off weight between take-off at Cairo-West on July 3 and take-off at Gibraltar on July 4– this although both main runways at Cairo-West were longer than that at Gibraltar. The runway at Gibraltar, which was east-west only, was 1,800 yards long, of which the last 270 yards were under repair. Those at Cairo-West were in 1943 as follows: 2,250 yards (345°), 2,000 yards (285°), and 1,475 yards (225°). Prchal took off at Gibraltar after a run of about 1,150 yards.

The on-paper all-up weight of the Liberator on take-off, as certified in the conclusions of the Court of Inquiry at Gibraltar, was 54,600 pounds, well below the rated maximum for Liberators, which was 56,000 pounds for that Mark of the aircraft. That the aircraft

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was loaded nearly to maximum is suggested by the second-order evidence revealed during our investigations.

Most convincing of all was the fact that the assumption that the plane was exceptionally heavily loaded on take-off was not voiced by the two ADC's Perry and Quayle alone, but by the pilot, in private, as well. Quayle, who, like Perry, saw the aircraft's interior as the passengers climbed in, has told us (May 1967) that in all the scores of Liberators he had to see off at North Front, he had never seen one so heavily and untidily laden as this one before; he recalls thinking to himself, "Christ, it does look mighty full!" Entirely independently of this statement, the R.A.F. officer Perry has related (June 1967) how his anxiety grew so much, as he saw this heavily-laden Liberator lumbering ponderously down the runway, that he actually started involuntarily to run towards it at the moment that it finally lifted off the ground. "I thought, My God, it's really loaded up too much this time!"

Equally interesting is what Prchal is reported to have informed a former R.A.F. officer, who like him returned to Czechoslovakia after the war. The statement, made at a time when Prchal was no longer under the immediate effect of the shock of the crash, was brought to our attention by the other officer, who now lives in London. He had flown as Prchal's regular navigator in the two years immediately after the war, but this partnership had been broken when the officer fled to the West after the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia in 1948. In any event, late in 1945, when both of them were flying in the newly-established Czechoslovakian State Airline, Edward Prchal had told him what he now assumed to have happened to the Liberator on the night of July 4, 1943. According to the navigator, Prchal told him that he could only assume that the plane had crashed because of its load. "When he took off, he did not have enough speed and he tried to gain speed by climbing and diving." As he was so heavily laden the control surfaces had little effect and the plane had just crashed into the sea.

So this in 1945 was what Prchal *assumed* had happened. One thing is certain: as a reliable and responsible pilot, he obviously took every possible precaution to ensure that this plane was not dangerously

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loaded on take-off. This may well have been what his flight engineer was doing during the twenty minutes that the plane is reported to have been standing with its engines running on the darkened end of the runway – ensuring that the plane's trim was correct. The plane would have "burnt off" about 500 pounds of aviation spirit during those twenty minutes.

21. Letter from Wing Commander Roland J. Falk (witness at Inquiry as Chief Test Pilot at Royal Aircraft Establishment, Farnborough), August 7, 1967. Letter from Falk, August 10, 1967, of which extracts are given below:

> Having read the proceedings of the Court of Inquiry I am now more than ever convinced that this explanation is the one that best fits the information we have about the accident. There is not one statement in the inquiry which disproves this theory and there are many which substantiate it.
>
> The report says, of the baggage and mail loaded in the aircraft: "Position of load: nose 1543 (lb.)." This was presumably in the bomb-aimer's compartment.
>
> Prchal: "I . . . attempted to pull back the control column but I could not do so. The control column was definitely locked. . . . I put on trim in an endeavour to gain height."
>
> If the aircraft was flying level when the controls jammed the jamming itself might move the elevator controls slightly thus causing the aircraft to descend. It is more likely, however, that, on finding he could not move the control column, the pilot would instinctively trim the aircraft "nose up." This would move the trim tab down. If the elevators were fixed, down trim tab would cause the aircraft to pitch nose down and descend.
>
> 6th Witness: "An airman . . . took the package from the bomb compartment."
>
> 14th Witness: "I saw an object lying on the runway . . . I found it to be a mailbag."
>
> Question to Prchal: "Have you ever heard of a mailbag or other article falling out . . . ?"
>
> Prchal: "No, but if it were loaded in the nose it is possible for an

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article to fall out through the nose-wheel aperture if not secured."

Wing Commander Stevens: "I have not carried out any minute examination for any signs of foreign bodies having been jammed between the teeth and chain rollers [of the control column sprockets and chains]. It would appear that it [the under-carriage] was fairly well up at the time of impact. . . ."

Flt. Lieut. Buck: "I examined the tail plane, elevators and rudders . . . the entire operating mechanism . . . and no defect was found which could not be attributed to the crash. All sprockets and chains . . . [after] examination showed no damage to teeth or rolls [rollers?]. A complete examination of the control system showed no signs of any jamming previous to the crash."

Wing Commander Stevens stated that: "The aeroplane was so badly damaged around the pilot's cockpit and forward of the centre section that the final position of any controls operated by cables might be very misleading." (This would also mean that any assumption regarding the possibility of jamming by "foreign bodies" in this area could be very misleading.)

It is my opinion that the 6th witness meant the nose compartment when he stated that "an airman . . . took a package from the bomb compartment." I believe that the airman failed to secure the remaining freight in the nose when he took the package out and that this was not re-checked before take-off because no-one in authority knew that it had been disturbed.

I also believe that Flt. Lieut. Buck failed to consider the possibility of the elevator control mechanism being jammed by a large object, such as a mailbag, being pressed by the nose-wheel against the bulkhead between the flight deck and the nose-wheel compartment. He was looking for jamming such as might occur if a small object became entangled between a chain and sprocket.

Regarding the tests at Lyneham, I do not suggest that the controls were jammed by the nose-wheel itself but that an object which became entangled with the nose-wheel was responsible.

During recovery of the wreckage it is highly probable that a mailbag trapped by the nose-wheel would be released, particularly as by then there would be no hydraulic pressure to hold the

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nose-wheel gear in the up position.

For comment on this theory a cable was sent to Prchal on August 1967, 10; no reply was received.

22. Testimony of Bolland *inter alia*, July 1943.
23. Testimony of Prchal, recalled after July 19, 1943.
24. Testimony of L.A.C. Miles, July 1943.
25. Interview of Perry, May 1967.
26. Mason-Macfarlane's Record, July 18, 1945.
27. Letter from Falk, August 10, 1967.

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